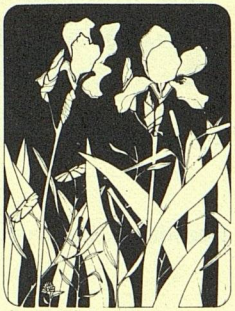
conditions: five

the black women's issue

CONDITIONS: FIVE

The Black Women's Issue

Co-edited by Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith



Nancy

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Illustration: "Irises" by Brenda L. Haywood. Etching on English scratchboard.

Conditions, a magazine of writing by women with an emphasis on writing by lesbians, is regularly edited by Elly Bulkin, Jan Clausen, Irena Klepfisz, and Rima Shore.

We dedicate The Black Women's Issue of Conditions *to Mabel Hampton (b. 1902) who has lived her whole life as a proud Black woman and Lesbian, and to Audre Lorde (b. 1934) who has given us countless words and visions we can use.*

We honor them both for their courage.

GLORIA T. HULL

POEM

for Audre

What you said
keeps bothering me
keeps needling, grinding
like toothache
or a bad
conscience:

"Your silence
will not
protect you"

"Our speaking is stopped
because we fear the visibility
without which
we can not really live"

You quietly stand there,
annealed by death,
mortality shining:

"Whether we speak or not,
the machine will crush us to bits—
and we will also
be afraid"

"Your silence
will not
protect you"

Some of us–
we dumb autistic ones,
the aphasics,
those who can only stutter
or point,

some who speak in tongues,
or write in invisible ink–
sit rigid, our eyelids burning
mute
from birth
from fear
from habit
for love and money
for children
for fear
for fear

while you probe
our agonized silence,
a constant pain:

Dear Eshu's Audre,
please keep on
teaching us
how
to speak,
to know
that now
"our labor *is*
more important than
our silence."

CONDITIONS: FIVE

The Black Women's Issue

Vol. II No. 2 **Autumn 1979**

PROSE POEMS

FICTION/AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

JOURNALS

ESSAYS

SONG LYRICS

REVIEWS

INTRODUCTION

We feel a need to share information about the production of this Black women's issue of CONDITIONS with our readers. The process of creating CONDITIONS: FIVE began when the CONDITIONS collective asked Barbara Smith to guest edit an issue of the magazine. Barbara agreed to do this in collaboration with Lorraine Bethel. We have worked together for over a year in the creation of this work.

One of the most exciting aspects of this issue of CONDITIONS is that so many new Black women writers are being published in a feminist publication for the first time. So often women's publications, presses, and organizations have claimed that they could not find any women of color as an excuse for their all-whiteness.

It is clear to us that lack of access to material resources is a major obstacle preventing the development of Black women writers, artists, and thinkers. We know that the financial support that allows the time and space to create are far too rare for Black and other Third World women.

This issue, however, clearly disproves the "non-existence" of Black feminist and Black lesbian writers and challenges forever our invisibility, particularly in the feminist press. It is important to share how we made contact with our contributors.

Of course we used our own extensive networks of personal contacts, but we also distributed flyers announcing the issue and soliciting manuscripts from all over the country. These flyers were sent not only to other feminist publications, but to Black publications that Black women read. Flyers also went to bookstores, women's centers, organizations and individuals. In other words, we and the ongoing editors of CONDITIONS made a huge effort to locate Black women outside of usual "feminist" networks.

Another aspect of this process was our encouraging Black women to write who had never published before. Several of our contributors are being published here for the first time and we feel there is a connection between our being Black women editors, creating an entirely Black women's issue, and motivating new Black women writers.

Our criteria for selecting writing for this issue were based on a combination of political and artistic standards. From the beginning we defined Black women's writing as writing by Black women about the experience of being Black and/or female. Therefore, we did not consider white/male writers' work about the Black female experience as suitable for CONDITIONS: FIVE. As it turned out, all of the writing we received was by Black women with one exception.

We decided to use the work of Black women both as a political/cultural statement and also because we realized the limitations of our competence and/or experience as two Afro-American women to deal with the literary representations of other Third World women's lives. We feel strongly that all women of color need autonomous publications that embody their particular identity; however, there is also a need for publications that encompass the experiences of all Third World women. AZALEA, a magazine by Third World lesbians, is a pioneering representative of the last category, along with the Third World women's issue of HERESIES: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics.

In choosing from the work that was submitted we placed a priority on writing concerning itself with the issues of feminism and lesbianism as they related to Black women. Our major reason for this standard comes from a belief that anti-feminism and homophobia in the Black community make it difficult, if not impossible, for Black women to publish lesbian/feminist writing in the traditional Black media.

We felt that for many Black lesbian/feminist writers CONDITIONS represented a rare chance for them to share their work in public. It seemed crucial to us that, given the racial/sexual politics of publishing, if we had to choose between giving space to a lesbian/feminist expression of the Black female experience and a less overtly radical treatment of this experience that would have a good chance of publication elsewhere, we should place a premium on providing a voice for the less publishable work. The restrictive effect of racial/sexual politics on Black women's writing is made clear for us by the fact that at least one lesbian writer felt the need to publish in this issue using a pseudonym.

Our artistic criteria were somewhat harder to define. We tried to

maintain a consciousness of the way that traditional white/male literary standards have been used oppressively against Black/female writers, and worked to set these standards aside as much as possible. We realize that Black women's writing is generally grounded in a tradition of oral expression, and tried to establish artistic guidelines appropriate to the aesthetic criteria intrinsic to Afro-American culture. A major concern we had was to make sure that the writing we chose communicated effectively, not only to us but to other readers as well. We realize that our judgement in this area was ultimately necessarily subjective, despite our attempts to be "objective" readers.

We tried to select a range of work representative of various types of writing—prose, poetry, fiction—and covering a wide group of political issues. This was difficult to do because we received heavy submissions in particular areas, and almost no material in others. Poetry was by far the largest category of work we got, while we were sent very few articles, and book reviews were particularly difficult to obtain. Though we worked to correct this imbalance, the uneven distribution of materials in this issue is itself a statement about what forms of expression are most viable and/or accessible for Black women writers.

There are no feature graphics inside the magazine due to the fact that we only received material from three artists. Trying to solicit art for this issue has given us a strong sense of the incredible oppression Black women face as visual artists. We feel the lack of visual materials in a Black women's magazine particularly strongly because the decorative arts have traditionally served as an outlet for Black female creativity when literary expression was not possible.

We are also aware of the literary expressions missing from CONDITIONS: FIVE. There are no writings on Black women in prison, older Black women/racism and ageism, no analysis of Black female economic oppression, and no general material on Black women and the health care system—sterilization abuse, etc. We feel that these are crucial areas of our experiences as Black women, and understand the strong need for research and information on these topics. We hope that what we could not present in this issue due to lack of resources, space, and time will emerge in other places as Black women see the possibilities for expressing our politics, feelings and experiences in writing.

Even with these acknowledged limitations, CONDITIONS: FIVE already has an herstoric place in women's publishing as an all Black women's issue. Its uniqueness suggests how it may be used at a time

when Black feminist and Black lesbian materials are still discouragingly scarce. Not only will it function as a resource for exposing individual women to Black feminist thought; we also suggest that it be considered and used as a text in a range of women's studies courses. It is appropriate for courses in women's literature, Black women writers, lesbian literature, Black women's studies, lesbian studies, the contemporary women's movement, feminist theory, etc. For the first time teachers of women's studies can integrate a body of positive and explicitly Black feminist material about Black women into their classes. By using CONDITIONS: FIVE in this way they also will greatly support a feminist small press publication which needs it, as opposed to a multi-national trade publisher which does not. Individual readers, especially white women, can also make a commitment to make sure that Black women they know find out about the issue and have an opportunity to read it.

Editing is invisible yet rigorous work: the countless letters and phone calls; the reading, reading, and re-reading; the often difficult decision-making, and the task that is most often thought of as "editing"—correcting and polishing the chosen manuscripts. Editing this issue was a difficult and long process for us because it was unpaid work performed in addition to our salaried employment.

Living in Boston, we worked on CONDITIONS: FIVE this year under yet more stringent and draining circumstances. As we did all the things mentioned above, twelve Black women were being murdered in Boston's Third World communities between January 29 and May 28, 1979. While we were working to create a place for celebration of Black women's lives, our sisters were dying. The sadness, fear, and anger as well as the unforeseen need to do political work around the murders affected every aspect of our lives including work on CONDITIONS: FIVE. The murders of Black women right where we lived also made crystal clear the dire need for such a publication and for a Black feminist movement absolutely opposed to violence against us and the taking of our lives on any and all levels.

We hope that this issue gives a sense of what is possible for Black women writers now, as well as what is necessary for our future. The space limitations of a single issue meant that we were not able to use all the work that met our criteria. We are also conscious of the Black women who were unable to submit work to us at this time due to prohibitive conditions in their lives. It is for all these reasons that we see a strong necessity for an ongoing publication entirely devoted to examining the racial/sexual politics of Black women's lives and art. CONDITIONS: FIVE makes it clear that the artists to support such a pub-

lication are available; what remains to be done is finding the material means to create and maintain it.

We would like to thank the women whose work appears here as well as those who sent material that was not used. It is only through your willingness to share what being Black women has meant to you on various levels—political, emotional, material, etc.—that this issue exists at all. We appreciate the courage and dedication involved in translating the Black female experience into words, and are very grateful that so many women were willing to trust their work with us. It has enriched our lives greatly, and we expect it will continue to touch the lives of many other readers for years to come.

Finally, we would also like to thank the following women for contributing their time, energy and support to us during the editing of CONDITIONS: FIVE: Tia Cross, Myrna Davis, Yvonne Flowers, Gloria T. Hull, Mary Nelson, Beverly Smith, Sherry Weingart.

Lorraine Bethel
Barbara Smith

27 July, 1979

GLORIA T. HULL

"UNDER THE DAYS": THE BURIED LIFE AND POETRY OF ANGELINA WELD GRIMKÉ

I.

Leaves that whisper whisper ever
Listen, listen, pray!
Birds that twitter twitter softly
Do not say me nay
Winds that breathe about, upon her
(Lines I do not dare)
Whisper, turtle, breathe upon her
That I find her fair.

II.

Rose whose soul unfolds white petaled
Touch her soul, use white
Rose whose thoughts unfold gold petaled
Blossom in her sight
Rose whose heart unfolds, red petaled
Prick her slow heart's stir
Tell her white, gold, red my love is–
And for her, –for her.

This lyric entitled "Rosabel" or "Rosalie" was written by Angelina Weld Grimké (1880-1958) some time during the early 1900's. It exists in faint holograph, perhaps the most finished of a score of explicitly woman-identified poems and fragments left behind by the author at her death.[1] These works and the life of the woman who wrote them ask and then help answer the question: What did it mean to be a Black Lesbian/poet in America at the beginning of the twentieth century? In Alice Walker's words, "It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood."[2]

Much of the meaning of Grimké's life was set even before she was born. Her father, Archibald Henry Grimké, was the nephew of sisters Sarah M. Grimké and Angelina Grimké Weld, the two famous fighters for abolition and women's rights. Romantics like to tell the story of how sister Angelina, secure in her Hyde Park Boston home, reached down

to Lincoln University, Pennsylvania to claim Archibald and his brother, slave sons born to her brother on a South Carolina plantation. Considerably less is said about the poet's mother Sarah E. Stanley, a writer described by the Boston *Sunday Globe* in 1894 as "a white woman who belonged to one of the best known families in this city."[3] She and Archibald were married in 1879, the same year that Aunt Angelina died; and when their daughter was born the next year on February 27, they named her Angelina Weld in memory of her great aunt. Sarah and her husband soon separated. She died in illness and some mystery in 1898, her sister writing to Angelina, then eighteen, five weeks after her death: "She never ceased to love you as dearly as ever and it was a great trial to her to have you go away from her. . . but it was the only thing to do."[4]

Thus, Angelina Weld Grimké grew up as a light-skinned, mixed-blood Black girl in the liberal, aristocratic atmosphere of old Boston. She attended Fairmount School in Hyde Park, the Carleton Academy at Northfield, Minnesota, Cushing Academy, Ashurnham, Massachusetts, and the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics—almost always as the only Black student. In a photograph taken of her class at Fairmount when she was ten years old, she stands unobtrusively in the middle of the picture—a tiny, East Indian-looking girl with large, sad eyes. The thousand conflicts and contradictions of her identity and position followed her through life. Her father, who became a successful lawyer, diplomat, and racial activist, constantly exhorted her to be good, study hard, be a lady, make him proud of her, etc., etc.—and smothered her with patriarchal love. She never learned to draw a free breath, and his passing in 1930 devastated her.

Peering past the surface of Grimké's life—past the schooling, homemaking, teaching (in Washington, D.C. from 1902-26), writing, vacationing—is difficult, especially when one is straining to discern the outlines of her emotional life and her relationships with women. Though Angelina said that she was accustomed to not having a mother, motherhood is a major theme in her literary works (particularly her drama and fiction), and all her female characters have loving mothers or mother surrogates. She admired her "Aunt Lottie," that is, the diarist Charlotte Forten Grimké (1838-1914) who married her Uncle Francis in 1878. They lived together for a time and Grimké wrote for her, her finest elegy "To Keep the Memory of Charlotte Forten Grimké." The poem begins:

> Still are there wonders of the dark and day;
> The muted shrillings of shy things at night,
> So small beneath the stars and moon;

The peace, dream-frail, but perfect while the light
Lies softly on the leaves at noon.
These are, and these will be
Until Eternity;
But she who loved them well has gone away.[5]

Other women also dimly appear—Clarissa Scott Delaney, another young poet whom she eulogized; Georgia Douglas Johnson, her age peer and sister poet whom she visited and complimented in an unpublished poem; and other acquaintances and correspondents, both Black and white, many famous.

And there is Mamie Burrill, the one woman for whom there is documentation of a clearly Lesbian relationship. In February 1896, Mamie sent her a youthful letter where, mixed in with apologies, school gossip, and church news, she recalled their secret good times together and reaffirmed her love: "Could I just come to meet thee once more, in the old sweet way, just coming at your calling, and like an angel bending o'er you breathe into your ear, 'I love you.'" For her part, Angelina was even more ardent. In a letter written later that year while she was at Carleton, she cries: "Oh Mamie if you only knew how my heart overflows with love for you and how it yearns and pants for one glimpse of your lovely face." With naive sweetness, she asks Mamie to be her "wife" and ends the letter: "Now may the Almighty father bless thee little one and keep thee safe from all harm, your passionate lover."

Mamie went on to become a teacher in the Washington, D.C. public school system and a playwright. Her 1919 one-act drama *They That Sit In Darkness* concerns a poor Black woman with too many children who is mired in childbearing and poverty because the system denies women access to birth control information.[6] Exactly what happened between her and Grimké is not clear. She may or may not have been the partner in the disastrous love affair which Grimké sets down in her first diary, kept from July 18 to September 10, 1903 when she was twenty-three years old. In her entry for September 6, she writes, after having spoken several times of a friend of hers and her new baby: "I shall never know what it means to be a mother, for I shall never marry. I am through with love and the like forever. . . ."

Why she resolved this is not clear; but it is probably related to the affair which she spills over about in the diary. She records her heartbreak and unhappiness because of some unnamed lover. She steeps herself in pain and misery and near the end of the diary, though the sharpness abates, confesses that she still loves the person. She decides, though,

that she will never marry, never know the joy of children, but will instead occupy her life with her father and her writing. Details about the lover and the relationship are sparse (they enjoyed some recreation and visits together; she and her father discussed them), and the few which do exist give no insight into why the liaison ended so tragically.

However, the manuscript poems she wrote during this period parallel the diary's story and indicate that the lover was female. "If"—one copy of which is dated July 31, 1903—is divided into halves. The first speculates that if every thought, hope, and dream the speaker has of her love becomes a pansy, rose, or maidenhair, then the world would be overrun with "rosy blooms, and pansy glooms and curling leaves of green." The second part, though, posits that if every look, word, and deed of the lover became ice, sleet, and snow, then "this old world would fast be curled beneath a wintry moon/With wastes of snow that livid glow—as it is now in June." Another poem, entitled "To Her of the Cruel Lips" and ending "I laugh, yet—my brain is sad," was written November 5, 1903. And, on January 16, 1904, Grimké is asking "Where is the Dream?" and "Why do I Love you so?"

Nothing else exists to tell us if and who and how she loved after this. She stuck to the external resolutions which she made in her diary—and probably continued to desire women, in silence and frustration.

The question—to repeat it—is: What did it mean to be a Black Lesbian/poet in America at the beginning of the twentieth century? First, it meant that you wrote (or half wrote)—in isolation—a lot which you did not show and knew you could not publish. It meant that when you did write to be printed, you did so in shackles—chained between the real experience you wanted to say and the conventions that would not give you voice. It meant that you fashioned a few race and nature poems, transliterated lyrics, and double-tongued verses which—sometimes (racism being what it is)—got published. It meant, finally, that you stopped writing altogether, dying, no doubt, with your real gifts stifled within[7]—and leaving behind (in a precious few cases) the little that manages to survive of your true self in fugitive pieces.

Grimké's legacy bears out these generalizations. Her published poetry, which appeared most heavily in the magazines and anthologies of the Harlem Renaissance (1920's), falls roughly into five general categories: 1) elegies, 2) love lyrics, 3) nature lyrics, 4) racial poems, and 5) poems about life and universal human experience. One of her earliest published mature pieces, "El Beso," reveals one way that Grimké

handled what seem to be woman-to-woman romantic situations.[8] Here, she writes of "your provocative laughter,/The gloom of your hair;/Lure of you, eye and lip"; and then "Pain, regret—your sobbing." Because of the "feel" of the poem and its diction ("sobbing," for example), the "you" visualizes as a woman—despite the absence of the third-person pronouns and the usual tendency most readers have (knowledge of persona, notwithstanding) to image the other in a love poem as being opposite in sex from the poem's known author. "A Mona Lisa" is similar in tone and approach. It begins:

> I should like to creep
> Through the long brown grasses
> That are your lashes;[9]

One of the very few joyous poems Grimké wrote is "At April" in which she commands the "Brown girl trees" to "Toss your gay lovely heads; Shake your downy russet curls" and to stretch slim bodies, arms, and toes. She also claims kinship with them in the lines "we/With the dark, dark bodies."[10]

All of this published work constitutes only a portion of her total corpus. Grimké's unpublished poetry can also be typed into the same five categories. But, as one might predict, it contains a heavier concentration of love lyrics. In these can be found the raw feeling, feminine pronouns, and womanly imagery which have been excised or muted in the published poems:

> Thou art to me a lone white star,
> That I may gaze on from afar;
> But I may never never press
> My lips on thine in mute caress,
> E'en touch the hem of thy pure dress,
> Thou art so far, so far. . . .

Or:

> My sweetheart walks down laughing ways
> Mid dancing glancing sunkissed ways
> And she is all in white. . .

Most of these lyrics either chronicle a romance which is now dead or record a cruel and unrequited love. The longest poem in this first group is "Autumn." Its initial stanza describes a bleak autumn with spring love gone; stanza two recalls that bygone spring, with its "slim slips of maiden moons, the shimmering stars;/And our love, our first love, glorious, yielding"; the final stanza paints the present

contrasting scene where "Your hand does not seek mine. . . the smile is not for me. . . [but] for the new life and dreams wherein I have no part." The anguish of the second type is captured in poems like "Give Me Your Eyes" and "Caprichosa," and distilled in lines such as:

> If I might taste but once, just once
> The dew
> Upon her lips

Another work in this group, "My Shrine," is interesting for its underlying psychological and artistic revelations. The speaker builds a shrine to/for her "maiden small, . . . divinely pure" inside her heart—away from those who might widen their eyes and guffaw. There she kneels, only then daring to speak her soulful words. This poem was carried to the typescript stage and, having reached this point, Grimké substituted "he" for "she" where it was unavoidable. In many of these lyrics, the loved one is wreathed in imagery of whiteness (even to the mentioning of "her sweet white hands"). This could suggest that at least one of the women to whom Grimké was attracted was white.

Needless to say, most of this poetry is fragmentary and unpolished. One reads it sensing the poet's tremendous need to voice, to vent, to share—if only on paper—what was pulsing within her, since it seems that sometimes she could not even talk to the woman she wanted, let alone anybody else. "Close your eyes," she says in one poem, "I hear nothing but the beating of my heart."

As a rule, Grimké's poetry is very delicate, musical, romantic, and pensive, and draws extensively on the natural world for allusions and figures of speech. Her greatest strength is her affinity for nature, her ability to really see it and then describe what she has seen with precision and subtlety. Take, for example, this stanza from her elegy "To Clarissa Scott Delaney":

> Does the beryl in tarns, the soft orchid in haze,
> The primrose through treetops, the unclouded jade
> Of the north sky, all earth's flamings and russets and grays
> Simply smudge out and fade?[11]

The mood of Grimké's work is predominantly sad and hushed (one of her favorite words). Colors—even when vivid—often are not the primary ones, but saffron, green-gold, lilac. Sounds are muted; effects are delicate. Emotion—even when intense—is quiet and refined:

> A hint of gold where the moon will be;
> Through the flocking clouds just a star or two;

Leaf sounds, soft and wet and hushed,
And oh! the crying want of you.[12]

Clearly these poetic themes of sadness and void, longing and frustration (which commentators have been at a loss to explain) relate directly to Grimké's convoluted life and thwarted sexuality. One also notes the self-abnegation and diminution which mark her work. It comes out in her persistent vision of herself as small and hidden, for instance, and in the death-wishing verses of "A Mona Lisa" and other poems. Equally as obvious is the connection between her Lesbianism and the slimness of her creative output. Because of psychic and artistic constraints, the "lines she did not dare" went as unwritten as they were unspoken. Ironically, the fact that Grimké did not write and publish enough is given as a major reason for the scanty recognition accorded her (and also other women poets of the Harlem Renaissance). She was triply disfranchised. Black, woman, Lesbian, there was no space in which she could move.

Even though the focus has been on Grimké's poetry, her other work should be mentioned—especially insofar as it relates to the issues raised here. She is also widely known as the author of *Rachel,* a three-act play published in 1920 which dramatizes the blighting effect of American racism on a sensitive young Black woman who, like her creator, vows never to bring children into this ugly world. Her choice of this plot was dictated by her aim of appealing to white women, whom she wished to awaken from their conservatism: "My belief was, then, that... if their hearts could be reached even if only a little, then perhaps, instead of being active or passive enemies, they might become, at least, less inimical and possibly friendly." (This was idealism.)

In 1919, she published a short story in Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control Review* called "The Closing Door." This is a terrible saga of a pregnant Black woman who hears that her brother has been lynched in Mississippi. Then, she begins crying out against having children "for the sport—the lust—of... mobs." When her son is born, she painfully refuses to have anything to do with him and one night steals into his room and smothers him, afterwards going mad and dying herself. It seems somehow wrong that this tale should appear in such a journal and even more peculiar that the killing societal reasons for the heroine's misfortunes would be used as an argument for birth control among Black people. Grimké also wrote other unpublished drama, fiction, and some expository prose. In this work, lynching and racial/sexual prejudice are thematic targets and women predominate as characters and subjects.

Despite the superficial socializing, Angelina Grimké lived her life in virtual isolation. A pretty little girl and attractive petite woman, she was described when a child as "sweet" and "sadfaced" by Anna Julia Cooper; and Charles S. Johnson, years later in 1927, remarks upon the "haughty sadness" of her face in a photograph.[13] Her relatively privileged class position as a comfortable, educated, racially-mixed Black woman buffered her from some of the harsher indignities of being Black in America during her time. But it only made more complex the unhappiness of her being. In her later years, she went a little crazy. (She couldn't be sane; and she wasn't.) During her father's illness and death, the strains of neurosis and paranoia in her personality became more pronounced—to the extent that she was threatening to exhume and rebury him, and her friends were counseling her to "keep the upper hand" and "get a fresh grip on yourself."[14] She moved from Washington, D.C. to New York, ostensibly for her writing. But she produced nothing—and, in Arna Bontemps' words, "spent the last years of her life in quiet retirement in a New York City apartment."[15] There she died in 1958.

Finally, we are left with the question: What is the meaning of Grimké's life to us? One of her own poems, "Under the Days," can serve to preface the answer:

> The days fall upon me;
> One by one, they fall,
> Like Leaves . . . . .
> They are black,
> They are gray.
> They are white;
> They are shot through with gold and fire.
> They fall,
> They fall
> Ceaselessly.
> They cover me,
> They crush,
> They smother.
> Who will ever find me
> Under the days?

Grimké lived a buried life. We research and resurrect—but have to struggle to find and connect with her, for she had no spirit left to send us. Unlike one of her contemporaries, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, who saw through adversity to triumph and heartens us even as we weep, Grimké was defeated. Flattened. Crushed. She is a lesson whose meaning each person will interpret as they see fit and are able. What she says to me is that

we must work, write, live so that who and what she was never has to mean the same again.

NOTES

[1] Except where otherwise noted, the poetry and other unpublished data quoted in this article can be found in the Manuscript Collection of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Washington, D.C. Grateful acknowledgement is due the Center for the use of this material. I would also like to thank personally Esme E. Bhan for her special assistance and courtesies.

[2] Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," *Ms.* (May 1974), 66.

[3] The Boston *Sunday Globe* (July 22, 1894), in a headnote to one of Angelina's juvenile poems.

[4] Emma Austin Tolles letter to AWG, October 1, 1898.

[5] Quoted from *Negro Poets and Their Poems*, 3rd ed., ed. Robert T. Kerlin (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, Inc., 1935), p. 155.

[6] This play is included in *Black Theater, U.S.A.: Forty-five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974*, ed. James W. Hatch and Ted Shine (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1974). It was first published in a September 1919 special issue of *The Birth Control Review*, "The New Emancipation: The Negroes' Need for Birth Control, As Seen By Themselves." Grimké's story "The Closing Door" (mentioned later) appeared in the same issue.

[7] Walker, p. 67.

[8] It was first published in the Boston *Transcript* (October 27, 1909).

[9] Quoted from *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets*, ed. Countee Cullen (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1927), p. 42.

[10] Quoted from *The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552-1950*, ed. Louise Bernikow (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 262.

[11] Quoted from *American Negro Poetry*, ed. Arna Bontemps (N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1963), p. 16.

[12] *Negro Poets and Their Poems*, p. 154.

[13] *Life and Writings of the Grimké Family* (Copyright Anna J. Cooper, 1951), p. 27. Johnson wrote this in a letter to AWG on June 1, 1927.

[14] Letter of Solomon C. Fuller to AWG, March 24, 1929; letter of Anna J. Cooper to AWG, "Easter Day 1930."

[15] "Biographical Notes," *American Negro Poetry*, p. 190.

I've been thinking of Diana Sands. The many meanings of her life. A life in the theater. I've been thinking of Diana Sands. All her movies have come to my vision via the tv screen. That small screen altered not her large eyes, hips, lips and thighs. The small screen made her large presence larger. A paradox. A commentary. The roles she played ran the gamut (little sister to medium-sized mama–she died before she could become a BIG MAMA) of roles for Black Women. The roles of Black Women. The limits. Small ideas. Small wishes. The shape and sense of people with small lips and eyes. What had they to do with her? Very little. Much too much. The roles ran the gamut to paraphrase Dorothy Parker from A to B. Sadness surrounded her. Sadness like her beauty became her and more. The brilliant quiver in her lips. The pleading motion of her hands. The sturdy intelligence in her eyes. The voice that mocked the words she had to speak. The complete actor. "Little Sister." "Hip Shaking Mama." "Committed Community Woman." "Radical College Student." The roles from a to b.

I have been thinking of Diana Sands. Her beauty. How comely, this dark sister was. How she and her fellow companions in brownness were given so very little. Took so much. The relegation of their beauty. To the background. Long shot. How she took so much. The power of her walk. The status of her anger. Her magnificent sensuality. Her strength. Definition of a Black Woman (as artist, as commercial artist): frustrated, angry, honest. A noun. Name. Proper names turned adjectives: smart, upfront, devious, brilliant, cunning like a fox, huh, like a fox. A what you see is not what you get woman. A bitch, perhaps, a raving bitch. Portrait in caricature. The names of women. Goddesses. Artists. Diana as an artist. Huntress with ambition and talent. Armed with intelligence and commitment. A knowledge of motion. Theory of sadness. One who knows her magic and can only use it in small ways. Minute portions. Of ambition and talent. Huntress with no bow or arrow. Disarmed and dangerous. What hearts to pierce? What desires to stimulate? What magic? What sadness. Definition of Diana Sands–all of the above and much, much more.

In THE LANDLORD she played a woman unsure of her power. A woman coming into a new day. Glorying in her Blackness. Without benefit of revolution or rhetoric. Just grand doses of self-love and honesty. She played a character so powerful the screen shivered when her face and body enters the frame. Closeup. The leopard in her walk appears subtly at first, then gets bolder. Her sense of rhythm, when to, when not to speak becomes paramount. An instrument not unlike Parker's alto. An instrument right on time. On time. The wings of a fine Black dove. Fluttering. Brilliant in the shadows of the evening star. She seduces. Is seduced. She loves. Is loved in return. She raves and rants and carries on like a woman, real in the world. Vulnerable. Responsible. She bears a half-white baby. When she gives up her child, a boy, she tells the father (white liberal hope a new generation, 1968) "why don't you take the baby, raise him up white, he needs to be casual like his daddy." She, like so many of her sisters, endures. Doing heads all day. Moving worlds in the confinement of her Brooklyn apartment. Tossing off the big dreams. Desiring the small ones. A pretty dress. No more beauty parlor work. The lucidity and love of her Black Man. (Who crazed is taken away from her.) She weeps. But she don't moan. She stands up for herself. Mistakes or none.

WHO IS THIS WOMAN? She's regular. A real woman. An act. An actress. Something kinda extraordinary. A trick. Magician. Working a kind of voodoo. She carries several ways of doing it in her back pocket. Full of degrees and dreams and drama lessons learned at the foot of the masters. WHO IS THIS WOMAN? Watch her smile. Watch her weep. Watch her move. Disarmed and dangerous. No goddess. Oh Diana. huntress with no bow and arrow. Ambitious and talented. Moons in her lips. Trees in her thighs. Rivers in her walk. Rise up. Rise up. Regular. A woman. Black and comely and bitter and beautiful. Dead. Now. Flickers on the small screen WHO IS THIS WOMAN? Dead. Now.

Where in the revival houses, can you see her? Ever see GEORGIA, GEORGIA? No. THE LANDLORD? No. Those countless television dramas dealing with the Negro Question? Question. Question. What is an intelligent sister to do? You can whore, they say, just so much. I mean what are we to say about integrity? WHO IS THIS WOMAN? Can an artist, a Black artist, one female and talented, especially have integrity? (Do you want to eat nigger, then play those small, back in the background roles—servant or whore, it does not matter, but) Dig, he can role his eyes, she can mock that walk, he can dance a jig, she can talk that talk (keep them in the background) . . . Diana in the background, growing larger in memory. Playing in closeup. Full faced. Beautiful. On the BIG SCREEN. In Cinemascope. Flickering in those large roles. Filled with bold words, distinct

gestures, humor, love, dramas for days like the gossip in our mothers' kitchens. Playing to overflowing crowds. Playing at home. Soft voiced: "I love you Coby." Dead. Now. Gone.

I have been thinking of the meanings of the life of Diana Sands. The compulsion to shame. The limitations of memory. How we have taken what little there is for us and made more. Much more. How Diana used her intelligence, her talent, her ambition, her love of craft and made a place where others may come and sense the change, the change that comes with endurance, with humor, with survival. How cheated we have been of her presence. How cheated she was of choices. How crucial the word choice is to Black People, to Black Women. How our magic, our charms, how sense and ability have been ruefully changed. Changed up. Made to hurt us. We self-created people, dancing in the middle of hurricanes. How we take on the stage the glorious ambivalence of our selves. New World. People. How Diana in her way made the difference. She and her companions in brownness have left a world where that difference is a legacy. Where the motions of her magic is still a matter of unique concern. How we need not weep. Nor moan. For our sister, departed of this world lives on really. Just like all the cliches. In the swift flickers of tiny dramas, listless comedies, an occasional brilliant piece that somehow made it past the mediocrity machine. We Sisters have a legacy. Of power. Of sadness. Of love, sweet love. Enduring. And sometimes conquering. The small space meant for us. The small space that she, disarmed and dangerous, refused to accept. (Coming in full blown, close-up cinematic magic full-spaced Black women singing, dancing, crying, laughing—Black Men walking, talking, backs straight-up unpimpish leading the chorus of five wild blues numbers grinning when they want to ALL ALIVE ALL WELL ALL MAGIC—just for us, just for us, just for us.)

I used to think
I can't be a poet
because a poem is being everything you can be
in one moment,
speaking with lightning protest
unveiling a fiery intellect
or letting the words drift feather-soft
into the ears of strangers
who will suddenly understand
my beautiful and tortured soul.
But, I've spent my life as a Black girl
a nappy-headed, no-haired,
fat-lipped,
big-bottomed Black girl
and the poem will surely come out wrong
like me.

And, I don't want everyone looking at me.

If I could be a cream-colored lovely
with gypsy curls,
someone's pecan dream and sweet sensation,
I'd be poetry in motion
without saying a word
and wouldn't have to make sense if I did.
If I were beautiful, I could be angry and cute
instead of an evil, pouting mammy bitch
a nigger woman, passed over
conquested and passed over,
a nigger woman
to do it to in the bushes.

My mother tells me
I used to run home crying
that I wanted to be light like my sisters.
She shook her head and told me
there was nothing wrong with my color.
She didn't tell me I was pretty
(so my head wouldn't swell up).

Black girls cannot afford to
have illusions of grandeur,
not ass kicking, too loud laughing,
mean and loose Black girls.

And even though in Afrika
I was mistaken for someone's fine sister or cousin
or neighbor down the way,
even though I swore
never again to walk with my head down,
ashamed,
never to care
that those people who celebrate
the popular brand of beauty
don't see me,
it still matters.

Looking for a job, it matters.
Standing next to my lover
when someone light gets that
"she ain't nothin come home with me" expression
it matters.

But it's not so bad now.
I can laugh about it,
trade stories and write poems
about all those put-downs,
my rage and hiding.
I'm through waiting for minds to change,
the 60's didn't put *me* on a throne
and as many years as I've been
Black like ebony
Black like the night
I have seen in the mirror
and the eyes of my sisters
that pretty is the woman in darkness
who flowers with loving.

THE SISTERS

Ntabuu
Ntabuu Selina and
Ntabuu of the red dirt road in New Orleans. Red dirt morning.
Hang dry sun below restless maple trees.

truckload of farm workermen
come juggle down the road
a hundred faces closed in the dawn
move along, move along. . .

In a home made wooden love seat Selina moves nearer. Ntabuu feels the warm hip and white gabardine skirt close. Selina blows cigarette ash from her bare breasts rising and falling voluptuous black.
Ntabuu
Ntabuu
Selina
Ntabuu is 27. She two months baby swollen. Mozambique skin purple she gapped tooth with nigger-toe eyes. Her squat body full of future unknown/her face solid woman stone. Yellow linen skirt folds pleat her thigh. In summer hot like this she does not wear panties she rather her touch-garden sweat (than itch) in July.

farm workermen sing along
sing along. . .

"You love him?"
"No."
"You want to marry him?"
"No."
"Why you having this baby?"
"Because we can't make one of our own."

Selina she 33 years old. Her charcoal body is angular and firm. She has never had a child or a man. She has never wanted one. She has always wanted to sing and decorate houses. Always loved her big white teeth and sculptured lips inherited from their grandmother.

"Just cause I want a baby Selina don't mean I love you any less."
"What *do* it mean."
"God is moving in me Selina. This is God."
"Bullshit."

> . . . a hundred faces closed in the migratory
> dawn
> lips dream last night's kisses
> bronze
> move along, sing along. . .

Ntabuu
Ntabuu
Ntabuu the pregnant dancer. Do splits for Selina. Do one two three kick. One two up. Kick. One two three down. Kick split for Selina in the next room singing do-re-mi-fa-so-la 3 days a week when students come see their 16 room Southern palace. Inherited from a half French grandmother. Knic knacs traditions and crystal tables. Old photographs of old aunts and great uncles in big hats and 2-tone shoes.

"What time is the doctor coming?"
"8:00 or soon after he said."
"You could still change your mind."
"No."
"Why goddamnit? We don't need nobody else."
"We got to have an heir."

In the evenings when the townmen come back sun tired/smelling of fruit trees and oppression they come see the Sisters. Come bring them berry apple pear and Selina cigarettes. Selina did not know one night one month someone slept over.

> Ntabuu give good massages he tells the others
> wait their turn their back muscles ache
> for her dancing touch maybe
> ache for the caress
> of julep oil heated on the wood burning stove. . .

"Ntabuu you love me?"
"Yes Selina."
"You mine?"
"Yes but you can't own me."

Ntabuu
Ntabuu love her sister/Selina.
Ntabuu
Ntabuu

"You love me Selina?"
"Yes girl."
"You want to marry me?"
"You crazy."
"Marry me Selina."
"I marry you."
"Do it proper."

Do it voluptuous mornings like this one. In their 4-posted bed. Ntabuu rolls closer. Musk oil and lapis lazuli. Her small hand explores nipple. Selina purrs. Ntabuu fondles the sassy blackness breathing beneath her own. Tongue and tender. Fingers trail her stomach quivers. Ntabuu. Open. Selina. Ntabuu. Way down. Purr Selina.

Purr. Open way down. Slow chant for Isis and Nefertiti. Probe her royal magic. Smell the bold journey. Wait. Flutter. Pulse Ntabuu. Cling Selina. Tangle fingers in hair and slow love sweat. Ancient graffiti hidden on vulva walls.

TAR BEACH

from Prosepiece, *part iii*

Gerri was young and black and lived in Queens and had a powder blue Ford that she nicknamed Bluefish. With her carefully waved hair, buttoned-down shirts, and grey flannel slacks she seemed just this side of square without being square at all once you got to know her. Through her Marion and I met other black lesbians who didn't come to Laurel's—the gay-girls' bar we frequented on weekends. By Gerri's invitation, and frequently by her wheels, we started going to parties on weekends in Brooklyn and Queens at different women's houses.

As a couple Marion and I were out of it a lot since much of the role-playing that went on was beyond us. It seemed to both of us that butch and femme role-playing was the very opposite of what we felt being gay was all about—the love of women. As we saw it, only women who did not really love other women nor themselves could possibly want to imitate the oppressive and stereotyped behaviour so often associated with being men or acting like men. Of course, this was not a popular view. There were butches and there were femmes but Lesbian, like Black, was still a fighting word.

Yet, Gerri's friends never put us down completely. Yes, we were peculiar, Marion and I, from our different colors right down to our raggedy-ass clothes. We had no regular jobs and queer heads—inside and out. The Afro hadn't been named yet, much less become popular, and Marion's shaggy-bowl haircut was definitely not considered dyke-chic.

But we were also very young at 19 and 21, and there was a kind of protectiveness extended to us for that reason from the other women that was largely unspoken. Someone always checked to see if we had a ride back to the city, or somewhere to stay over for the night. There was also some feeling that as self-professed poets we could be a little extra peculiar if we needed to be.

One of the women I met at one of these parties was Kitty.

When I saw Kitty again one night years later in the Swing Rendezvous or the Pony Stable or the Page Three—that tour of second-string gay-girl bars that I had taken to making alone that sad lonely spring of 1957—it was easy to recall the St. Albans smell of green Queens summer night and plastic couch covers and liquor and hair oil and women's bodies at the party where we first had met.

In that brick-faced frame house in Queens the downstairs pine-paneled recreation room was alive and pulsing with loud music, good food, and beautiful black women in all different combinations of dress and semi-dress.

There were whip-cord summer suits with starch-shiny shirt collars open at the neck as a concession to the high summer heat, and white gabardine slacks with pleated fronts or slim ivy-league styling for the very slender. There were wheat-colored Cowden jeans (the fashion favorite that summer) with knife-edge creases, and even then one or two back-buckled grey pants over well-chalked buckskin shoes. There were garrison belts galore—broad black leather belts with shiny thin buckles that originated in Army-Navy surplus stores—and oxford-styled shirts of the new, iron-free Dacron with its stiff, see-through crispness. These shirts, short-sleeved and man-tailored, were tucked neatly into belted pants or tight, skinny, straight skirts. Only the one or two jersey knit shirts were allowed to fall freely outside.

Bermuda shorts and their shorter cousins—Jamaica shorts—were already making their appearance on the dyke-chic scene, the rules of which were every bit as cut-throat as the tyrannies of Seventh Avenue or Paris. These shorts were worn by butch and femme alike and for this reason were slow to be incorporated into many fashionable gay-girl wardrobes. Clothes were often the most important or only way of broadcasting one's chosen sexual role.

Here and there throughout the room the flash of brightly colored below-the-knee full skirts over low-necked tight bodices could be seen, along with tight sheath dresses and the shine of thin high heels next to bucks and sneakers and loafers.

Femmes wore their hair in tightly curled pageboy bobs, piled high on their heads in sculptured bunches of curls, or in feather cuts framing their faces. That sweetly clean fragrance of beauty parlour that hung over all black women's gatherings in the fifties was present here also adding its identifiable smell of hot comb and hair pomade to the other aromas in the room.

Butches wore their hair cut shorter: in a D.A. shaped to a point in back, a short pageboy, or sometimes in a tightly curled poodle that pre-dated the natural Afro. But this was a rarity, and I can only remember one other black woman at that party besides me whose hair was not straightened—an acquaintance of ours from the Lower East Side named Ida.

On a table behind the built-in bar stood opened bottles of gin, bourbon, scotch, soda, and other various mixers. The bar itself was covered with little delicacies of all descriptions: chips, dips, and little crackers and squares of bread laced with the usual dabs of egg salad and sardine paste. There was a platter of delicious fried chicken wings and a pan of potato and egg salad dressed with vinegar. Bowls of olives and pickles surrounded the main dishes along with trays of red crabapples and little sweet onions on toothpicks.

But the centerpiece of the whole table was a huge platter of succulent and thinly-sliced roast beef set into an underpan of cracked ice. Upon the beige platter each slice of rare meat had been lovingly laid out and individually folded up into a vulval pattern with a tiny dab of mayonnaise at the crucial apex. The pink-brown folded meat around the pale cream-yellow dot formed suggestive sculptures that made a great hit with all the women present. Petey—at whose house the party was being given and the creator of the meat sculptures—smilingly acknowledged the many compliments on her platter with a long-necked graceful nod of her elegant dancer's head.

The room's particular mix of heat-smells, music, and Marion's introduction, half-fading as she drifted off with her cocked cigarette and inevitable bottle of beer, gives way in my mind to the high-cheeked, dark young woman with the silk-deep voice and appraising eyes.

Perched on the edge of the low bench where I was sitting she absently wiped specks of lipstick from both corners of her mouth with the downward flick of a delicate forefinger.

"Audre . . . that's a nice name. What's it short for?"

My damp arm hairs bristled in the Ruth Brown music and the heat. I could not stand anybody messing around with my name, not even with nicknames.

"Nothing. It's just Audre. What's Kitty short for?"

"Afrekete," she said, snapping her fingers in time to the rhythm

of it and giving a long laugh. "That's me. The black pussycat." She laughed again. "I like your hairdo. Are you a singer?"

"No." She continued to stare at me with her large direct eyes.

I was suddenly too embarrassed at not knowing what else to say to meet her calmly erotic gaze, so I stood up abruptly and said in my best Laurel's-terse tone, "Let's dance."

Her face was broad and smooth under too-light make-up, but as we danced a foxtrot she started to sweat and her skin took on a deep shiny richness. Kitty closed her eyes partway when she danced, and her one gold-rimmed front tooth flashed as she smiled and occasionally caught her lower lip in time to the music.

Her yellow poplin shirt—cut in the style of an Eisenhower jacket—had a zipper that was half open in the summer heat showing collarbones that stood out like brown wings from her long neck. Garments with zippers were highly prized among the more liberal set of gay-girls because these also could be worn by butch or femme alike on certain occasions without causing any adverse or troublesome comments. Her narrow, well-pressed khaki skirt was topped by a black belt that matched my own except in its newness. Her natty trimness made me feel almost shabby in my well-worn riding pants, my usual uniform for parties.

I thought she was very pretty and I wished I could dance with as much ease as she did, or as effortlessly. Her hair, dressed in the popular style of short feathery curls around her head, had been straightened; but in that room of well set marcels and D.A.s and pageboys, it was the closest cut to my own.

Kitty smelled of soap and Jean Nate, and I kept thinking she was bigger than she actually was because there was a comfortable smell about her that I always associated with large women. There was another spicy herb-like odor that I later identified as a combination of coconut oil and Yardley's Lavender Hair Pomade. Her mouth was full and her lipstick was dark and shiny—a new Max Factor shade called "Warpaint."

The next dance was a slow "fish" that suited me fine. I never knew whether to lead or to follow in most other dances, and even the effort to decide which was which was as difficult for me as having to decide all the time the difference between left and right. Somehow that simple distinction had never become automatic for me and all that deciding usually left me very little energy with which to enjoy the movement and the music.

But "fishing" was different. A forerunner of the later one-step, it was in reality your basic slow bump and grind. The low red lamp and the crowded St. Albans parlour floor left us just enough room to hold each other frankly, arms around neck and waist, and the slow intimate music moved our bodies much more than our feet.

That had been in St. Albans, Queens, nearly two years before, when Marion had seemed to be the certainty in my life that I might learn to trust. Now in the spring of this new year I had my own apartment all to myself again, but I was mourning. I avoided visiting pairs of friends or even inviting even numbers of people over to my house because the happiness of couples, or just their mere togetherness, hurt me too much in its absence from my own life whose blankest hole was named Marion. I had not been back to Queens or to any party since Marion and I had broken up, and the only people I saw outside of work and school were gay-girls who lived in the Village as I did, most of whom were white.

"Hey, girl, long time no see." Kitty spotted me first. We shook hands. The bar was not crowded so it probably was the Page Three, which didn't fill up until after midnight. "Where's your girlfriend?"

I told her that Marion and I weren't together any more. "Yeah? That's too bad. You-all were kinda cute together. But that's the way it goes. How long you been in the life?"

I stared at Kitty without answering, trying to think of how to explain to her that for me there was only one life—my own—however I chose to live it. But she seemed to take the words right out of my mouth.

"Not that it matters," she said speculatively, finishing the beer she had carried over to the end of the bar where I was sitting. "We don't have but one, anyway, at least this time around." She took my arm. "Come on, let's dance."

Kitty was still trim and fast-lined, but with an easier looseness about her smile and a lot less makeup. Without its camouflage her chocolate skin and deep, sculptured mouth reminded me of a Benin bronze. Her hair was still straightened, but shorter, and her black bermuda shorts and knee socks matched her astonishingly shiny black loafers. A black turtleneck pullover completed her sleek costume. Somehow, this time, my rough and ready jeans did not feel shabby beside her but only a variation upon some similar dress. Maybe it was because our belts still

matched—broad, black, and brass-buckled.

We moved to the back room and danced to Frankie Lymon's "Goody Goody," and then to a Belafonte calypso. Dancing with her this time I knew who I was and where I was going; how I felt was more important to me right then than any lead or follow.

The room felt very warm even though it was only just spring, and Kitty and I smiled at each other as the number ended. We stood waiting for the next record to drop and the next dance to begin. It was a slow Sinatra, and our belt buckles kept getting in the way as we moved in close to the oiled music, so we slid them around to the side of our waists when no one was looking.

For the last few months since Marion had moved out my skin had felt cold and hard and essential, like thin frozen leather that was keeping the shape expected. That night on the dance floor of the Page Three bar every time Kitty and I touched our bodies together in dancing I could feel my carapace soften slowly and then finally melt until I felt myself covered in a warm, almost forgotten, softness that ebbed and flowed at each contact of our clothed and moving bodies.

I could feel something slowly give way in her also, as if a taut string was becoming undone, and finally we didn't start back to the bar at all between dances but just stood on the floor waiting for the next record, dancing only with each other. A little after midnight in a silent and mutual decision we split the Page together, walking blocks through the West Village over to Hudson Street where her car was parked. She had invited me up to her house for a drink.

The sweat beneath my breasts from our dancing was turning cold in the not quite spring sharpness of the night air as we crossed Sheridan Square. I paused to wave to the steadies through the plate glass windows of Jim Atkins—the all-night diner on the corner of Christopher Street.

In the car, I tried not to think about what I was doing as we rode uptown almost in silence. There was an ache in the well beneath my stomach, spreading out and down between my legs like mercury. The woman smell of her, mixed with feathery cologne and lavender pomade, anointed the car. The sight of her coconut-spicy hands on the steering wheel, and the curve of her lashes as she attended the roadway, made it easy for me to coast beneath her sporadic bursts of conversation with only an occasional friendly grunt from me.

"I haven't been downtown to the bars in a while, you know? It's funny. I don't know why I don't go downtown more often. But every once in a while, something tells me go and I go. I guess it must be different when you live around there all the time." She turned her gold-flecked smile upon me.

Crossing 59th Street, I had an acute moment of panic. Who was this woman? Suppose she really intended only to give me the drink which she had offered me as we left the Page? Suppose I had totally misunderstood the impact of her invitation, and would soon find myself stranded uptown at 3:00 AM on a Sunday morning; did I even have enough change left in my jeans for carfare home? Had I put out enough food for the cats? Was Flee coming over with her camera tomorrow morning, and would she feed the cats if I wasn't there? If I wasn't there.

If I wasn't there. The implication of that thought was so shaking it almost threw me out of the car. I had had only enough money for one beer that night so I knew I wasn't high, and reefer was only for special occasions at Flee's largesse. Part of me felt like a raging lioness, inflamed in desire. Even the words in my head seemed borrowed from a dime-store novel. But that part of me was drunk on the touch and thighed nearness of this exciting unknown dark woman who calmly moved us through Upper Manhattan with her patent leather loafers and her camel's-hair swing coat and her easy talk, from time to time her one gloved hand touching my denimed leg for emphasis.

Another piece of me felt bumbling, inept, and about four years old. I was the idiot playing at being a lover who was going to be found out shortly and laughed at for my pretensions, as well as rejected out of hand.

Would it be possible—was it ever possible—for two women to share the fire we felt that night without entrapping or smothering each other? I longed for that as I longed for her body, doubting both, eager for both.

And how was it possible that I should be dreaming the roll of this woman's sea into and around mine when only a few short hours ago, and for so many months before, I had been still mourning the loss of Marion, so sure that I would continue being broken-hearted forever? And what then if I had been mistaken? If that hot lump in my groin would have gone away I'd have jumped out of the car door at the very next traffic light. Or so I thought to myself.

We came out of the park drive at Seventh Avenue and 110th

Street, and as quickly as the light changed on the now deserted avenue Afrekete turned her broad-lipped beautiful face to me with no smile at all. Her great lidded luminescent eyes looked directly and startlingly into mine. It was as if she had suddenly become another person, as if the wall of glass formed by my spectacles behind which I had become so used to hiding had suddenly dissolved.

In an uninflected, almost formal, voice that perfectly matched and thereby obliterated all my question marks, she said, "Can you spend the night?"

And then it finally occurred to me that perhaps she also might have been having the same questions about me that I had been having about her. I was almost left without breath by the combination of her delicacy and her directness, a combination that even today is still rare and precious.

For beyond the assurance that her question offered me—a declaration that this singing of my flesh, this attraction, was not all within my own head—beyond that assurance was a batch of delicate assumptions built into that simple phrase that reverberated in my poet's brain. It offered us both an out if necessary. If the answer to the question might, by any chance, have been "no" then its very syntax allowed for a reason of impossibility rather than of choice; "I can't," rather than "I won't." The demands of another commitment, an early job, a sick cat, etc., could be lived with more easily than an out and out rejection.

Even the phrase "spending the night" was less a euphemism for making love than it was an allowable space provided in which one could move back or forth. If, perhaps, I were to change my mind before the traffic light and decide that no, I wasn't gay after all, then a simpler companionship was still available.

I steadied myself enough to say, in my very best Lower East Side Casual voice, "I'd really like to," cursing myself for the banal words and wondering if she could smell my nervousness and my desperate desire to be suave and debonaire which was drowning in sheer desire. We parked half in and half out of a bus stop on Manhattan Avenue and 113th Street in Gennie's old neighborhood.

Something about Kitty made me feel like a rollercoaster, rocketing from idiot to goddess. By the time we had collected her mail from the broken mailbox and then climbed six flights of stairs up to her front door I felt that there had never been anything else my body had ever

intended to do more than to reach inside of her coat and take Afrekete into my arms, fitting her body into the curves of mine tightly, her beige camel's-hair billowing around us both and her gloved hand still holding the door key.

In the faint light of the hallway her lips were surf upon an ocean that I hungered to plunge beneath.

It was a 1½ room kitchenette apartment with tall narrow windows in the narrow, high-ceilinged front room. Across each window there were several built-in shelves at different levels. From these shelves tossed, frothed, hung, leaned, and stood pot after clay pot of green and tousled large- and small-leaved plants of all sizes, shapes, and conditions.

Later, I came to love the way in which the plants filtered the southern exposure sunlight through the room until it hit the opposite wall at a point about six inches above the 30 gallon fish tank that murmured softly, like a quiet jewel, standing on its wrought iron legs, glowing and mysterious.

Leisurely and swiftly, translucent rainbowed fish darted back and forth through the lit water perusing the glass sides of the tank for morsels of food, swimming in and out of the marvelous world created by colored gravels, stone tunnels, and bridges that lined the floor of the tank. Astride one of the bridges, her bent head seeming to observe the little fish that swam in and out between her legs, stood a little jointed brown doll, her smooth naked body washed by the bubbles rising up from the air unit located behind her.

Between the green plants and the glowing magical tank of exotic fish lay a room the contents of which I can no longer separate in my mind except for the plaid-covered couch which opened up into a double bed we set rocking as we loved that night into a bright Sunday morning dappled with green sunlight from the plants in Afrekete's high windows.

I woke to her house suffused in that light, the sky half-seen from the couch through the windows of the top floor kitchenette apartment, and Afrekete, known, asleep against my side. The little hairs under her navel lay down before my advancing tongue like the beckoned pages of a well-touched book. We poled our craft into each other's head-waters and I quieted my thirst again and again at her stream.

How many times into summer that year I turned into that block from Eighth Avenue, the saloon on the corner spilling a smell of sawdust

and liquor onto the street, along with a shifting and indeterminate number of young and old black men taking turns sitting on two upturned milk crates playing checkers or cards. I would turn the corner into 113th Street towards the park, my steps quickening and my fingertips tingling to play in her earth.

And I remember Afrekete who came out of a dream to me being hard and real as the fire hairs along the underedge of my navel, always being. She brought me live things from the bush, and from her farm which was set out in cocoyams and cassava—those magical fruit which she bought in the West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue in the 140's or in the Puerto Rican stalls and *bodegas* within the bustling market over on Park Avenue and 116th Street under the railroad bridge.

"I got this 'under the bridge' " was a saying from time immemorial in my family that gave an adequate explanation that whatever it was had come from as far back and as close to home—that is to say was as authentic—as was possible.

There were green plantains which we half peeled and then planted, fruit-deep, in each other's bodies until the petals of skin lay like tendrils of broad green fire upon the curly darkness between your upspread thighs. There were ripe red finger bananas, stubby and sweet, with which I parted your lips gently to insert the peeled fruit into your grape-purple flower.

After I held you, I lay between your brown legs slowly playing my tongue through your familiar forests, slowly licking and swallowing as the deep undulations and tidal motions of your strong body slowly mashed the ripe banana into a beige cream that mixed with the juices of your electric flesh. Then our bodies met again, each surface touched with each other's flame from the tips of our curled toes to our tongues, and locked into our own wild rhythms we rode each other across the thundering space.

We were each of us both together. Then we were apart, and the sweat sheened our beautiful bodies like sweet oil.

Sometimes Afrekete sang in a small club further uptown on Sugar Hill, sometimes she clerked in a Gristedes Market on 97th Street and Amsterdam, and sometimes with no warning at all she'd appear at the Sea Colony or Pony Stable or Page Three or Grapevine on Saturday night. Once, even, I came home to Seventh Street late one night to find

her sitting on my stoop at 3:00 A.M. after the bars had closed with a bottle of beer in her hand and a piece of bright African cloth wrapped around her head. We sped uptown through the dawn empty city with a summer thunder squall crackling above us and the wet streets singing beneath the wheels of her little Nash Rambler.

There are certain verities which are always with us, and which we come to depend upon. That the sun moves north in summer, that melted ice will contract, that the curved banana is sweeter. Afrekete taught me roots and a deeper opening into new definitions of our woman's bodies—definitions for which I felt I had only been in training to learn before.

By the beginning of summer the walls of her apartment were always warm to the touch from the heat beating down on the roof, and a chance breeze through her windows would rustle her plants in the window and then brush over our sweat-smooth bodies at rest and together after loving.

We talked sometimes about what it meant to love women, and what a relief it was in the eye of the storm, no matter how often we had to bite our tongues and stay silent. Afrekete had a seven-year-old daughter whom she had left with her mama down in Georgia, and we shared a lot of our dreams. "She's going to be able to love anybody she wants to love," Afrekete said fiercely, lighting a Lucky Strike. "Same way's she's going to be able to work any place she damn well pleases. Her mama's going to see to that."

Once we talked about how black women had been committed by choice to waging our campaigns in the enemies' strongholds, too much and too often, and how our and our sisters' psychic lands had been decimated and scar-wearied by those repeated battles and campaigns.

"And don't I have the scars to prove it," she sighed. "Makes you tough though, babe, if you don't go under. And that's what I like about you—you're like me. We're both going to make it because we're both too tough and crazy not to!" We held each other and laughed and cried about what we had paid for that toughness and how hard it was to explain to anyone who didn't already know it, that soft and tough had to be one and the same for either to work at all, like our joy and the tears mingling on the one pillow beneath our heads.

And the sun filtered down upon us through the dusty windows and the mass of green plants that Afrekete tended religiously. I took a ripe avocado and rolled it between my hands until the skin became a

green case for the soft mashed fruit inside, a hard pit at the core. *Then I rose from a kiss in your mouth to nibble a hole in the fruit skin near its navel stalk, and I squeezed the pale yellow-green fruit juice in thin ritual lines back and forth over and around your coconut brown belly.*

The oil and sweat from our bodies kept the fruit liquid, and I massaged it over your thighs and between your breasts until your brownness shone like a light through a veil of the palest green avocado, a mantle of goddess pear that I slowly licked deliciously from your warm skin.

Then we would have to get up to take the pits and fruit skins and bag them to put out later for the garbage men, because if we left them near the bed for any length of time they would call out the hordes of cockroaches that always waited on the sidelines within the walls of Harlem tenements, particularly in the smaller older brownstones under the hill of Morningside Heights.

Afrekete lived not far from Genevieve's grandmother's house, but I never met her until years after Gennie's death.

Sometimes Afrekete reminded me of Ella, Gennie's stepmother, who would shuffle about with an apron on and a broom outside the room where Gennie and I lay on the studio couch which opened into the bed that Ella and David sometimes slept in when the real owner of the apartment, David's cousin, came to call with a woman friend and stayed the night in the front bedroom while Gennie slept on the parlor floor.

Gennie and I would be toasting our marshmallows on the end of a Hunter High pencil with a match, burning our fingers, smoking a cigarette between us and drinking warm Champale. We could hear Ella singing her non-stop tuneless little song over and over and over outside our door as she swept:

Momma kilt me
Poppa et me
Po' lil' brudder
suck ma bones.....

And one day Gennie turned her head on my lap to say uneasily, "You know, sometimes I don't know whether Ella's crazy, or stupid, or divine."

And now I think the goddess was speaking through Ella also, but Ella was too beaten down and anesthetized by David's brutality for her

to believe in her own mouth, and we, Gennie and I, we were too arrogant and childish—not without right or reason, for we were indeed still or scarcely more than children—we were too arrogant or frightened to see that our survival might very well lay in listening to the shuffling, sweeping woman's tuneless song.

I lost my sister Gennie to my silence and her pain and despair, to both our angers, and to the world's cruelty that destroys its own young in passing—not even as a rebel gesture or sacrifice or hope for another living of the spirit—but only out of not noticing or caring about the destruction. I have never been able to blind myself to that cruelty. So, according to one popular definition of mental health, that makes me mentally unhealthy.

Afrekete's house was the tallest one near the corner, before the high rocks of Morningside Park began on the other side of the avenue, and one night on the Midsummer Eve's Moon we took a blanket up to the roof. She lived on the top floor, and in an unspoken agreement the roof belonged mostly to those who had to live under its heat. The roof was the chief resort territory of tenement dwellers, and was known as "Tar Beach."

We jammed the roof door shut with our sneakers and spread our blanket in the lee of the chimney, between its warm brick wall and the high parapet of the building's face. This was before the blaze of sulphur lamps had stripped the streets of New York of trees and shadow, and the incandescence from the lights below faded this far up. From behind the parapet wall we could see the dark shapes of the basalt and granite bedrock outcroppings looming over us from the park across the street, outlined, curiously close and suggestive.

We slipped off the cotton shifts we had worn and moved against each other's damp breasts in the shadow of the roof's chimney, making moon, honor, love, while the ghostly vague light drifting upward from the street competed with the silver hard sweetness of the full moon reflected in the shiny mirrors of our sweat-slippery dark bodies, sacred as the ocean at high tide.

I remember the moon rising against the tilted planes of her upthrust thighs, and my tongue caught the streak of silver reflected in the curly bush of her dappled-dark maiden hair. *I remember the full moon like white pupils in the center of your wide irises.*

The moons went out, and your eyes grew dark as you rolled over me and I felt the moon's silver light mix with the wet of your tongue on my eyelids.

Afrekete Afrekete ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman's power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters that the discarded evils, abandoned at all crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys.

When we came down from the roof later it was into the sweltering midnight of a west Harlem summer, with canned music in the streets and the disagreeable whines of overtired and overheated children. Nearby, mothers and fathers sat on stoops or milk crates and striped camp chairs fanning themselves absently and talking or thinking about work as usual tomorrow and not enough sleep.

It was not onto the pale sands of Whydah, nor the beaches of Winneba or Annamabu, with cocopalms softly applauding and crickets keeping time with the pounding of a tar-laden, treacherous, beautiful sea. It was onto 113th Street that we descended after our meeting under the Midsummer Eve's moon, but the mothers and fathers smiled at us in greeting as we strolled down to Eighth Avenue, hand in hand.

I had not seen Afrekete for a few weeks in July, so I went uptown to her house one evening since she didn't have a phone. The door was locked, and there was no one on the roof when I called up the stairwell. I wanted to tell her that I was going to Detroit to visit my friend Marie. When I returned two weeks later Midge, the bartender at the Pony Stable, gave me a note from Afrekete saying that she had gotten a gig in Atlanta for September and was splitting to visit her ma and daughter for a while. I never saw her again.

We had come together like the elements erupting into an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge, brief and drenching. Then we parted, passed, reformed, reshaping ourselves the better for the exchange. I never saw Afrekete again, but her print remains upon my life with the power of an emotional tattoo.

"ARTISTS WITHOUT ART FORM": A LOOK AT ONE BLACK WOMAN'S WORLD OF UNREVERED BLACK WOMEN

Over the years the black woman novelist has not been taken seriously. "Shallow," "emotional," "unstructured," "reactionary," and "just too painful" are some of the criticisms against her work. That she is a woman makes her work marginal. That she is black makes it minor. That she is both makes it alien. But these criticisms have not stopped the flow of her ink. The black woman writer has insisted upon recording the tragic and the fortunate of her lot. And in so doing she answers the question posed by actress/activist Abbey Lincoln some twelve years ago in her essay titled, "Who Will Revere the Black Woman?"[1] The black woman artist will revere the black woman. For it is her duty to record and capture with song, clay, strings, dance and, in this case, ink, the joys and pains of black womanhood. And the person who is sane, secure and sensitive enough to revere her art is the same person who will revere her life. Sojourner Truth, a poet in her own way, knew all of this when she told her mostly white audience, "I suppose I am about the only colored woman that goes about to speak for the rights of colored women."

The story is told that years ago when Philip, a disciple, told a passerby, Nathanael, of the wonders and good works of Jesus, Nathanael replied incredulously: "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?"* That same question is being asked by the Nathanaels of the literary world today: "Can there any good thing come out of black women's lives?" The answer is the same today as it was back then when Philip answered: "Come and see."

Because her world depicts black women in their strongest and weakest moments, in their most sane and insane times, in their most creative and uncreative expressions, in their most responsible and blame-

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*Nazareth being a ghetto section of Babylon.

less deeds, let us take a look at one particular black woman novelist's documentation of black women's lives. Let us see what she is recording for our daughters' daughters to refer to years from now when they too may be posed with the question: Can there any good thing come out of black women's lives, especially those of Lorain, Ohio? Come and see... THE BLUEST EYE, SULA, SONG OF SOLOMON.[2] Welcome to the world of black women through the ink of Toni Morrison.

* * * * *

Toni Morrison is one of the few authors I enjoy rereading. Having lived in the North for the last six years (against my better senses), when I read Morrison's novels I am reminded of home: the South. Although the setting of her three books takes place in an area of the country I have never seen—the Midwest—there is something very familiar, very nostalgic about the people I meet on her pages. There is something about their meddling communities which reminds me of the men and women I so desperately miss back home.

Yet, sometimes I am intolerant of these Midwestern black people. Out of an inexcusable vein of selfishness over something which I feel is mine and mine alone as a Southerner, I sneer and say, "How dare you Midwesterners act Southern. You *left* the South. So just leave our country ways with us!" But this cry is never more than a thought because eventually I accept what all black folks come to realize about themselves: that practically all black folks in America not living in the South are *imports*—imported Northerners, imported Midwesterners, etc. This is what Morrison does a convincing job of showing her readers: that we carry to our various new regions, along with our hopes, lingering traces of our old Southern country ways. In Medallion, Ohio, Hannah—Sula's mother—loves to go barefoot when the seasons allow, and when it doesn't she wears "... a man's leather slippers with the backs flattened under her heels" (43). Known for always chewing on something, Pilate—a character in SONG OF SOLOMON—loves pine needles and straws and brooms. And we must never forget those women Morrison so breathtakingly describes in THE BLUEST EYE who may move to far off places but, no matter where they go, "... smell like wood, newspapers, and vanilla... straighten their hair with Dixie Peach, and part it on the side... and curl it in paper from brown paper bags" (68). *Now if that ain't country!*

Like a spider who patiently spins her silk web for her prey, Morrison is intent upon luring her readers into the worlds they remember

from childhood, heard their parents speak longingly of, or worlds they read about in textbooks but had neither the imagination nor intuition to comprehend. Worlds where black people can fly, and black men sit up all night on picket fences determined to protect the little bit they have. Worlds where women leave home with no thought about door keys or pocketbooks and walk down the streets with absolutely nothing in their hands; where for a quarter one can buy a bag of potato chips, three Powerhouse candy bars and have a dime left. Her web is a web only colored folks could appreciate.

Except for the last book, SONG OF SOLOMON, Morrison's stories center around the lives of black women. However, SONG OF SOLOMON'S strongest and most certainly interesting characters are the women: Pilate, Ruth, Circe, Hagar, and First Corinthians. Her first book, THE BLUEST EYE, centers around a little black girl who is convinced that she is "relentlessly and aggressively ugly" and spends the entirety of her dreams and reality praying for eyes as blue as Shirley Temple's. She is forced to accept madness instead. Then there is the friendship of two black women in SULA who find themselves involved with unfulfilling and unwholesome relationships when all they need, in actuality, is one another.

Morrison is too perceptive, too committed to telling the whole truth to confine her stories to *just* the woman the jacket covers of her books say is the protagonist. As though compelled to explain truthfully why we are who we are, Toni Morrison pays tribute to the countless women in our neighborhoods, supporting actresses if you will, who help to shape our lives: the prostitutes and Miss Geraldine in THE BLUEST EYE; Helene Wright and Ajax's mother in SULA, and *every* woman in SONG OF SOLOMON who is forced to play a supporting role to Milkman Dead.

Morrison pays tribute to those black women who are doing everything in life but what they are supposed to be doing. Creative women—like so many black women are—without outlets for their creativity. "Artists with no art form" is how Sula Peace is described—and this applies to every female character Morrison creates:

> In a way, her strangeness, her naivete, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged

> the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous. (112)

Such black women are both mourned and praised. Praised because many of them make do with their unrecognized, unnamed talents: instead of becoming the painter she was supposed to be, Pauline Breedlove is a stickler for orderly arrangements, "Jars on shelves at canning, peach pits on the step, sticks, stones, leaves. . . organized into neat lines, according to their size, shape, or gradations of color"; never recognizing the poetry within her, Pilate contents herself with musing over a fourth grade geography book and talks in beautiful folkloric riddles; not knowing that she could be a dancer, Sula, instead, channels her tremendous curiosity and energy into unscrupulous and unsatisfying lovemaking. These black women are mourned because many of them become more dangerous to themselves than to anyone else. Hagar slips into madness when all the energy she has is spent loving an unlovable man.

These "artists with no art form" appear to be the single most central theme in all three novels. Women who because of color *and* sex are relegated to stools behind windows looking out at life passing them by. In an interview with Robert Steptoe for the *Massachusetts Review,* Morrison speaks of her own experience which influences her view of women:

> I feel a very strong sense of place not in terms of the country or the state, but in terms of the details, the feeling, the mood of the community, the town. . . my relationship to things in a house would be different from, say my brother's or my father's or my sons'. I clean them and I move them and I do very intimate things "in place." I am sort of rooted in it, so that writings about being in a room looking out, or being in a world looking out, or living in a small definite place is probably very common among most women anyway.[3]

Certainly the narrowness of those rooms, of women's lives, comes through in Morrison's writings.

But narrow is relative. To convince one that something is indeed narrow it must be juxtaposed to something else to show that it is not only narrow but, in the case of life, destructive too. What could make the narrowness of women's lives more convincing than to compare them

with men's lives? Cholly Breedlove. Ajax. Boy Boy. Jude. Macon. Milkman. Guitar. Although black male characters in Morrison's works, they did not have the onus of being women too.

In all three books the reader will find metaphors about flight. Men seeking to fly, soar, get up and go. Women, with their broken wings, confined by children, society, and narrow rooms. Because men are men, more options, more space is available to them to find themselves. When their space becomes too narrow there is always the option to up and leave. In THE BLUEST EYE we find Pecola, a young black girl haunted by something all women live in constant fear of and try desperately to avoid at all cost: ugliness.

> Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed
> her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely
> futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged
> but grounded bird, intent on the blue void
> it could not reach—could not even see—but
> which filled the valleys of the mind.

Yet Ajax in SULA loves airplanes for the freedom and flight they symbolize for a man who doesn't want to be nailed down. SONG OF SOLOMON's entire theme is about a young man who, dissatisfied with self, journeys to find his past; there he discovers that his fore*father* was a man who got tired enough one day to up and fly away. (Africans were believed to have been able to fly once before they came to this land and ate salt.) Imagine the sense of freedom this discovery must have given Milkman. But why couldn't his older sister, First Corinthians, have made the same journey and discovery? When you take up and go, fly away, someone is usually left behind. Most times it's women and children.

Through Sula Peace and Pilate Dead, the reader gets glimpses of women who are free enough within themselves to search for their own space. But there is a price for such freedom in women: loneliness/aloneness. Sula loses her best friend; Pilate never has one. They become the pariahs of the neighborhood around whom all gossip, prayers, witchcraft, and stares revolve. In a May 1, 1962 journal entry, Lorraine Hansberry wrote: "Eventually it comes to you: the thing that makes you exceptional, if you are at all, is inevitably that which must also make you lonely. . . ."[4] Through Sula's death, however, Morrison points out that without such women in the neighborhood there is no one against whom "upright" women can measure their righteousness.

Prior to its publication no one had explored thematically the sub-

ject of black female friendship as was done in SULA. At a reading at Sarah Lawrence College, Morrison told her audience, "The loneliest woman in the world is a woman without a close womanfriend."[5] Friendship. Pecola was too ugly to have it, Sula too independent to keep it, Ruth and Pilate were too eccentric to know they needed it. Yet when we were all little girls, Morrison shows us through Nel and Sula, in our childish world of "ain't never gonna do's," we found love, tenderness, the other halves of ourselves in our girlfriends. Then we were too giggly for sex and too restless for responsibility.

> . . . it was in their dreams that the two girls had first met. . . their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate for it let them use each other to grow on. . . they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (51)

But along with budding breasts and pubic hair, comes men and our love for one another becomes misplaced. Like Nel, we allow men to slip in and occupy not only their space, but the space once occupied by our girlfriend(s). In all three novels the tension and sorrow caused in every woman's life is because of a man—husbands, sons, lovers, brothers, fathers, and nephews. A devotion which is not always reciprocated. Not one of the male characters *wraps* his life around his woman, his family, to the doting extent that the women do; in SONG OF SOLOMON Macon Dead has a family because it is the middle class thing to have, like a 1936 Packard.

Through the lives of Nel and Ruth we learn that no matter how far we as black women stray from one another, eventually it will be a black woman that we turn to for comfort and advice when a man fails to love us the way we wish. Nel discovers this far too late. Ruth never comes to fully understand her dependency upon Pilate.

There has been criticism that some of Morrison's characters border on being "bigger than life." I suspect that those who feel this way know nothing of the sheer miracle it is that black people, and black women especially, have survived all these years. There is nothing commonplace about a people who have survived, and continue surviving, some of the most brutal oppression that human beings can inflict upon one another. Such people have a tendency to indulge themselves in

fantasies or rituals which have no relationship with reality or sanity. And so it is that we find a woman named Pilate who, already motherless since birth, witnesses her father's brutal murder and later discovers that probably everyone else in the world except her has a navel as evidence of their "normality." Who dares question why such a woman folds a slip of paper that her father first wrote her name upon, puts the paper in a tin box, strings up the box and pierces the entire contraption through an earlobe? That tin box was the navel she never had. Sula's grandmother, Eva Peace, who is rumored to have sold one of her beautiful legs to feed her children, out of love kills a son because his life wasn't worth living and jumps out a window to cover her body over a daughter who is burning to death. Life sometimes forces us to rise above it, Morrison points out, in order to survive it whole.

But nothing seems to be more precious to the author, who in turn endears it to her reader, than those exquisite idiosyncracies that black women take hold of to help them through hard times. In her 1971 article, "What a Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," published in *The New York Times,* Morrison suggests, "And [the black woman] had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself."[6] I may add, in creating herself the black woman may very well seem idiosyncratic/eccentric/weird to those who have maleness and/or whiteness to fall back on. Morrison points out in THE BLUEST EYE that those who do survive the crime of being black women have a right to every eccentricity they may accumulate over the years:

> Edging into life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, "Do this." White children said, "Give me that." White men said, "Come here." Black men said, "Lay down." The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and created it in their own image. They ran the houses of white people, and knew it. When white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. (109)

Morrison continues:

> Then they were old. Their bodies honed, their

> odor sour. Squatting in a cane field, kneeling by a river bank, they had carried a world on their heads. They had given over the lives of their own children and tendered their grandchildren. With relief they wrapped their heads in rags, and their breasts in flannel; eased their feet into felt. They were through with lust and lactation, beyond tears and terror. They alone could walk the roads of Mississippi, the lanes of Georgia, the fields of Alabama, unmolested. They were old enough to be irritable when and where they chose, tired enough to look forward to death, disinterested enough to accept the idea of pain while ignoring the presence of pain. They were, in fact and at last, free. And the lives of these old black women were synthesized in their eye—a purée of tragedy and humor, wickedness and serenity, truth and fantasy. (110)

Morrison's second most pronounced theme shook the chains of my own enclosed reality. I was forced to ask myself, why it is that I—who supposedly have more than my mother in terms of possessions and intellect—have not the sense of stability, conviction, nor propriety that she has? Why is it that my life crumbles easier than hers? Faced with the same degree of ugliness and rejection, why does Pecola mentally crumble when her mother Pauline has the *something* in her which propels her to carve sanity out of insanity and hold on to it? What happened to Sula that she has neither the sense of place or responsibility that her grandmother, Eva, and—to a lesser extent—her mother, Hannah, had? Hagar was crushed under the weight of unreturned love, whereas the same lovelessness in her mother and grandmother's lives made them love each other the more. Morrison asks us through her creation of generations of women, "What happens to our children once we cross the Mason-Dixon? What have our children lost that we were too busy surviving to lose?" Or, more specifically, "What have they picked up in this urban environment which sends them into worlds of insanity we never knew?"

Another frequent criticism of Morrison's work and other black women's literature is that there are usually no substantial white characters. A criticism which seems to suggest that such an omission lessens the literary significance of the novel. Alice Walker, like Morrison, a crucial black writer, must go on record for her observation:

> It seems to me that black writing has suffered, because even black critics have assumed that a

> book that deals with the relationships between members of a black family—or between a man and a woman—is less important than one that has white people as a primary antagonist. The consequence of this is that many of our books by "major" writers (always male) tell us little about the culture, history, or future, imagination, fantasies, etc. of black people, and a lot about isolated (often improbable) or limited encounters with a nonspecific white world.[7]

Without creating white characters, Morrison creates white characters. Their influence alone is enough. Thus we see Pecola Breedlove in THE BLUEST EYE coveting blue eyes and curly locks. Then we meet SONG OF SOLOMON's Corinthians Dead who, having made herself utterly useless to black men with her ivy education at Bryn Mawr and French lessons at the Sorbonne, becomes "unfit for eighty percent of the useful work of the world." Lying on her death bed, Hagar moans over and over that the man she loves prefers "curly wavy silky hair." Morrison knows what Walker knows what black women have always known: that white people do more harm to us when they are not around than when they are.

Very few authors can claim the ability to depict madness as the most logical, lucid, orderly thoughts in one's mind. Madness is never just madness to Morrison. It is a way of *coping* when sanity will no longer do. Shadrack's, Pecola's, and Hagar's madness are logical choices for their realities. But maybe it is we who think we are sane that really are insane. We are the ones who tell little girls like Pecola that she is ugly as she is and tell Hagar that she needs the love of a selfish immature man like Milkman Dead to make her complete as a woman.

When we get down to the final analysis it is always love. In each of the three novels it is love which we actually see in its best and worst moments. THE BLUEST EYE tells us:

> Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free [wo]man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses [her] gift of love. (159)

"Beauty, love... actually, I think all the time that I write, I'm writing about love or its absence," Morrison says in an interview recorded in

Black American Literature Forum.[8] Clearly we need to be taught to love.

I could never do justice to the richness and potency of Morrison's novels. They are too full of metaphors, folklore, and lessons that I have not lived long enough to appreciate. The themes mentioned briefly in this article certainly do not exhaust the works.

Through this particular author's ink, we find a recording of only some of the women we can find in our neighborhoods. These women, and the countless more yet unheard, must be revered by the black woman artist. They have no hands, no voices, except those of the artists who are stirred to capture them.

Can there any good thing come out of black women's lives? Come and see. Come and see us in our moments of madness, in our moments of sanity. Come and see us when we love and when we are unloved. Come and see us as we survive, anyhow. Come and see us make a way out of no way. Can there any good thing come out of black women's lives? Yes. Miracles.

Lorraine Hansberry once wrote that the artist hooks her audience when the art form is commensurate with the message.[9] I am very glad that Toni Morrison has found her art form. I am even more pleased that her message is a tribute to the black female artists yet without their art forms, whose very survival is a statement of courageous defiance.

NOTES

[1] Abbey Lincoln, "Who Will Revere The Black Woman?" in Toni Cade [Bambara], ed., *The Black Woman* (New York: Signet Books, 1970).

[2] Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972, 1976, orig. 1970); *Sula* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974, orig. 1973); and *Song of Solomon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977). All subsequent references to these works will be designated in the text.

[3] *Massachusetts Review* (Fall 1977).

[4] Lorraine Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (New York: Signet Books, 1970).

[5] In the spring of '78, Morrison read excerpts from her book *Song of Solomon* at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York.

[6] Toni Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," in the *New York Times Magazine* (August 22, 1971), p. 63.

[7] John O'Brien, ed., *Interviews with Black Writers* (New York: Liverwright, 1973), p. 201.

[8] *Black American Literature Forum,* Vol. 12, No. 2 (Summer, 1978).

[9] Hansberry, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

AMONG THE THINGS THAT USE TO BE

Use to be

Ya could learn
a whole lot of stuff
sitting in them
beauty shop chairs

Use to be

Ya could meet
a whole lot of other women
sittin there
along with hair frying
spit flying
and babies crying

Use to be

you could learn
a whole lot about
how to catch up
with yourself
and some other folks
in your household.
Lots more got taken care of
than hair
Cause in our mutual obvious dislike
for nappiness
we came together
under the hot comb
to share
and share
and share

But now we walk
heads high
naps full of pride
with not a backward glance
at some of the beauty in
that which

use to be

Cause with a natural
there is no natural place
for us to congregate
to mull over
our mutual discontent

Beauty shops
could have been
a hell-of-a-place
to ferment
a. . . . . revolution.

REVELATION

I

An old woman in me walks patiently to the hospital,
I felt ridiculous,
I was mad about my life,
it was never in harmony with Momma's,
and now her 300 pressure pushed life every which a way,
I couldn't stand her god,
I wanted to hurt her spoiled sons,
but I smiled and fed Momma potatoes, peaches,
the softest food I could find,
why didn't I give her the tobacco she asked for?

II

Momma had cut through,
I flew home Christmas and heard her
talking about Harriet Tubman on a Seagram's calendar
and asking didn't Sojourner Truth look like Grandma?
a little darker though,
not talking no Jesus to me,
she had exchanged the Christian truth for the real truth
and just asked if I'd fix the tree.
The white man that molested your brother's grandchild
who was playing Mary in the Nativity play,
you understood him too late.
Only nine and five, sisters walking home from school
into a slum once a neighborhood of choir members, garden keepers,
coming home they faced his knife and sucked his desire,
their father searches to kill the man.

At the hospital
I watch the room fill with those faithful lovers –
grandmothers with no switches in their hands,
silent about your brother's grandgirls,
always silent about sex,
glad to see me even though I am too grown for my own good,
they had rehearsed the Nativity play
the same as nothing had happened,
expecting the molested child to say Mary's lines.

III

Momma, a unselfish woman,
soft-voiced and brown in an apron
and setting a table with the Lord's Prayer,
once a child sharecropper whose father was driven
from the land to the Ohio steel mills,
Momma grew up not liking artificial flowers,
married, bore children, watched her husband leave,
she loved the end of winter,
birds pulling Spring out as worms,
the earth in her fingers planting-red morning glories,
petunias, sunflowers decorating our yard,
braiding our hair, proud of my brothers,
she held her head up as we moved into the projects.

IV

My brother, a Central State graduate in elementary education,
shot heroin while teaching his sixth grade class,
he started his habit in Black Power meetings
denouncing mothers like Momma as apolitical women.
For years Momma hid his secret,
one Christmas I slept on the sofa,
at 3:00 am in the morning
my youngest brother came in and overcharged
the other for heroin,
their fight waking me.

At coffee the sunrise,
I questioned Momma til she dug out
her son's needle.
"No," my brother said, "I am not on,"
later that day he was fighting with
our younger brother.
I saw Momma run between them
at the top of the stairs,
Momma screaming, "You should say brother, that's enough,"
all three of them falling down the stairs,
Momma's head landing at my feet.

In the new year the mothers
walked to the Mayor's office
with the name and address of the drug dealers,
next week the dealers moved to another address.

V

I felt rough from the needs that took me away,
weakened from comfortable white minds,
afraid to come home so broken,
afraid to lose you, Momma
confused and painful like my brother's arms,
but contemptuous of his needle.
I walk to the store for a pop,
Arabs own the corner store now,
we still stand outside.
I grow older,
agreeing with my Uncle, no new kidney,
"I want your mother to pass sweetly,"
and the fear spreads more,
til everybody saw me and said I was fine
and looked so good
and when am I coming back to stay.

LOVE LETTER

Dear Samson,
I put your hair
in a jar
by the pear tree
near the well.
I been thinkin'
over what I done
and I still don't think
God gave you
all that strength
for you to kill
my people.

Love – Delilah

RESUMÉ

In a few weeks
she turns 25
The prodigy child

The next fleeting minutes
she will be older
than she was before

The 4th grade bookworm
3rd row from the back
who wrote a complete, scripted interview
with Christopher Columbus and an NBC
correspondent
in elementary school she was what you call
bright

She was gifted
though relatives could not
pinpoint at what exactly

But, needless to say, she was an only child
of a large family
always somehow set apart
a bit removed and strange
'cause she was still considered desirable
even with an erratic marsh of acne
even in high school
when being "stacked" was far
better than timeless beauty anyway

Anyway, like I said, she was different
how
in college she managed
to be on the Dean's List and be
a figurehead in the Black Student League,
copulating on every occasion, between pinochle games,
and still eking out a letter home

on Mondays
(". . . exams over this week. By the way,
need $40 to. . .")
Even had an entourage
She thrived on that kind of thing.
Liked a challenge. . .
She straddled cultures well, even at 18

And so it went
picking up awards here and there
just at 20 was considered interesting
Marie's daughter made movies
and talked about odd things
like light meters
but never marriage

though she consistently stayed in love
for 6 years
with separate faces
sharing mutual fantasies

They say she's
a bit offbeat
but manages to hold down
a steady, upwardly mobile job
in television
see what I mean—
ambitious

These mornings
she finds company
with good wine and music
on some weird timetable with success

But lately, she lost the game
she plays so well
At some point, you have to grow up
she resolves
though her memories
of how she imagined
It Was Gonna Be
were cushioned

and the growing pains

(OBSERVATIONS AT A POETRY READING, WOMEN'S DETENTION CENTER, SUMMER '75)

Bitch Butch Black

but
women all
Ladies in waiting
for sentences or
paroles
Look through bars for eyes

Skepticism as a way of life
Crime as survival
Prison as the payback
Hard knocks make hard hearts that don't beat to art

Light, angels of mercy
poets
come to read you free
confront a wall of blank stares
that know too well do-good haste

The griots call: Do our words touch you?
The women's response: Do you care?

MISFITS

Emptiness filling me, I send an explosion of spores in all directions, hoping one will plant a light in the distance. Another juvenile probation-detention center goes up on the corner. We're expected to fall apart one way or another, as they would, under these circumstances. My fern is sprouted and I have no waters. The lights will be shut off Tuesday if I don't screw up on the money.

I look at the chess sets on display and remember when I learned to play, so many lifetimes ago; and how my little brother taught my daughter; and how she forgot, too, until she found, by some quirk of nature, a small group of partners, when she was in seventh grade. No one does this here; my Spanish and French have died, I've forgotten all but the common, informal table settings. I asked my daughter to refresh my memory; she says they don't teach anything like that in school, anymore. She had no idea they had. I told her I'd teach her, when I remember. The five and dime has books for 15¢, 10¢, a nickel. I know of only one family of readers, and another who pretends. My daughter, now fourteen, and I set Wednesday aside for chess.

The wind blows the earth away, uprooting what I've sown. It takes, at least, $1000 to move in the ghetto, and the houses are dirty, because you'll tear them up trying to clean them.

Today is the elections. I've always voted. Suddenly I'm not registered, pages missing from the books downtown. That proposition must have been important. . . but please don't steal a loaf of bread.

It seems that the need, here, is to fight; for respect, for love, for life. I place myself out of reach. They pass my sanctuary with axes; chop at the juniper trees in my garden. . . I keep the herbs inside.

Insomnia watches for footsteps, tipping and prowling in the night. I check the windows again, listen for the patterns of breathing children, and make friends with the sounds bringing day. Dew on the spider webs shows nothing was disturbed. Little white flowers bloomed on the asparagus fern during the night, and the aroma brought good spirits to surround me.

·Am I an over-protective mother? I look into Billy's hazel eyes; I owe him a lot. Strength confuses them. They don't understand it's gentleness. Noses pressed to the window, not knowing what to look for, run mucous. I'm always washing my children. The roses, suffocating, mold. Each leaf, stained with white spots, takes on an abnormal texture and curls toward the middle. I light incense, then a candle, and pray very ancient prayers. . . the words complete the circle of time, along with the dragonfly who suspended and sped away triggering memories. A rare and colorful bird's mate bleeds good fortune. I towel my family dry when I'm sure their pores have soaked up all they can possibly hold. I ask for forgiveness and favors. It is Ramadan.

They don't grow things and they don't want me to grow them. The weeding is never done. Seeds fly from their neglected yards, and touch my children on the way home from school; they make me write poems at 3 a.m., and bathe with dragons, and cry toward the valley of the kings for guidance they provide, and I can get, from father, who I'm exactly like and I never knew, I fought so hard to be myself. The smell of the sandalwood fills me, the flame is long and stable, Papa's hands remained the same after death. He held them in the coffin as he had in life. I look at mine. Evidently, there's much for us to do; I plant his vegetables for him, and he plants for me wherever he is. I think of moving.

Caterpillars single-file to the grapevines. I don't know what to do. I love grapes and butterflies. The neighbors throw trash over the fence into my yard. This takes time away from gardening. I could have planted many rows of beets in the time it took to clean. I sat in the grass staring out into the Eastern sky, thinking, it will take at least $1000.

I'M NOT THAT LONELY

Hey Mama, Can I go home with you?

What?

Can I go home wit cha?

What did you say!?

Can I go home whi-chou?

What!

Never mind.

Could it be that you don't have a home?
Is it that you wanted to spend a few seconds
between my thighs to get you through the
night?
Have you tried counting sheep?

Here's a crash course in closeness
With a sweet sister's love. You only
need sincerity and some vision to
see that you mar me with your crudeness.
I'm not a thing to be gotten with
at any moment's notice.

Hello sister, how's the night treating you?
Fine I feel real good tonight.
We both smile.
Which is much better than "Can I come home wit-cha."
I've never been that lonely.

THE TIRED POEM
LAST LETTER FROM A TYPICAL UNEMPLOYED BLACK PROFESSIONAL WOMAN

So it's a gorgeous afternoon in the park
It's so nice you forget your Attitude
The one your mama taught you
The one that says Don't-Mess-With-Me
You forget until you hear all this
Whistling and lip-smacking
You whip around and say
I ain't no damn dog
It's a young guy
His mouth drops open
Excuse me Sister
How you doing
You lie and smile and say
I'm doing good
Everything's cool Brother

Then five minutes later
Hey you Sweet Devil
Hey girl come here
You tense sigh calculate
You know the lean boys and bearded men
Are only cousins and lovers and friends
Sometimes when you say hey
You get a beautiful surprised smile
Or a good talk
And you've listened to your uncle when he was drunk
Talking about how he has to scuffle to get by and
How he'd wanted to be an engineer
And you talk to Joko who wants to be a singer and
Buy some clothes and get a house for his mother
The Soc and Psych books say you're domineering
And you've been to enough
Sisters-Are-Not-Taking-Care-Of-Business discussions

To know where you went wrong
It's decided it had to be the day you decided to go to school
Still you remember the last time you said hey
So you keep on walking
What you too good to speak
Don't nobody want you no way Ho'

You go home sit on the front steps and listen to
Your neighbor's son brag about
How many girls he has pregnant
You ask him if he's going to take care of the babies
What if he gets taken to court
And what are the girls going to do
He has pictures of them all
This real cute one was supposed to go to college
Dumb broad knew she could get pregnant
I'll just say it's not mine
On the back of this picture of a girl in a cap and gown
It says something like
I love you in my own strange way
Thank you

Then you go in the house
Flip through a magazine and there is
An Ode-To-My-Black-Queen poem
The kind where the Brother
Thanks all of the Sisters who Endured
Way back when he didn't have his Shit Together
And you wonder where they are now
And you know what happens when you try to resist
All of this Enduring
And you think how this
Thank-you poem is really
No consolation at all
Unless you believe
What the man you met on the train told you
The Black man who worked for the State Department
And had lived in 5 countries

He said
Dear you were born to suffer
Why don't you give me your address
And I'll come visit

So you try to talk to your friend
About the train and the park and everything
And how it all seems somehow connected
And he says
You're just a Typical Black Professional Woman
Some sisters know how to deal
Right about here
Your end of the conversation phases out
He goes on to say how
Black Professional Women have always had the advantage
You have to stop and think about that one
Maybe you are supposed to be grateful for those sweaty
Beefy-faced white businessmen who try to pick you up at lunchtime
And you wonder how many times your friend has had pennies thrown at hi
How many times he's been felt up in the subway
How many times he's been cussed out on the street
You wonder how many times he's been offered $10 for a piece of himself

$10 for a piece
So you're waiting for the bus
And you look at this young Black man
Asking if you want to make some money
You look at him for a long time
You imagine the little dingy room at the Y
It would only take 20 minutes or less
You think about how you only get $15 for spending all day with 30 kids
And how nobody is offering you
Any cash for your poems
You remember again how you have the advantage
How you're not taking care of business
How this man is somebody's kid brother or cousin and could be your own
So you try to explain how $10 wouldn't pay for what you'd have to give up

He pushes a handful of sticky crumpled dollars into your face and says
Why not
You think I can't pay
Look at that roll
Don't tell me you don't need the money
Cause I know you do
I'll give you 15

You maintain your sense of humor
You remember a joke you heard
Well no matter what
A Black Woman never has to starve
Just as long as there are
Dirty toilets and. . .
Somehow it isn't funny
Then you wonder if he would at least
Give you the money
And not beat you up
But you're very cool and say
No thanks
You tell him he should spend his time
Looking for someone he cares about
Who cares about him
He waves you off
Get outta my face
I don't have time for that bullshit
You blew it Bitch

Then
(Is it suddenly)
Your voice gets loud
And fills the night street
Your voice gets louder and louder
Your bus comes
The second shift people file on
The watchmen and nurse's aides
Look at you like you're crazy

Get on the damn bus
And remember
You blew it
He turns away
Your bus pulls off
There is no one on the street but you

And then
It is
Very
Quiet

JANET SINGLETON

ON ROSES AND THORNS

My Chinese roommate, whose innocence and peace I envy, hands me a rose for Valentine's Day and says, "we must do these things for ourselves; we can't depend on men for our roses."

I search for a vase and my mind searches also.

A close friend, whose humanism obscures a bloody Anglo background, curves her lips and confidently declares womanhood to be the icing upon the cake. I think of myself as twelve with gradually budding womanhood, asking, "Daddy, when I was born did you want a boy or a girl?" I knew he had desired as the rest but I hoped my presence had brought a change of heart. "They both eat, don't they?" he says.

A vase cannot be found and I think of another friend.

There is a woman I have known since she was fourteen and our growing up coincided with our growing friendship. Her heritage is Greek and Swedish. She thinks that I am articulate and witty and when she says that she quotes me to others I am both embarrassed and flattered. Yet a few years ago, a young man from the West Side, whom I had a brief, adolescent crush on, rationalized his interracial attractions by telling me that white women are far more expressive.

I obtain a tall glass from the cupboard and remember this:

A middle-aged Chicana mother who is returning to school after rearing a multitude of children, tells me that she has thought I was bright and special since she first noticed me and only regrets that I cannot meet her son who is a genius and living in California. I wonder what the mother would think if she knew that my father frequently called me "stupid."

As tap water fills the glass I think of an unseasonably warm winter day.

I am walking down Detroit Street and a truck passes. Its two male passengers attempt to get my attention. I blurt, "hello," and continue

to walk. A white woman of about fifty is walking her dog and approaches me. "Do you know those men?" she asks. I shake my head. "Well, don't ever go anywhere with strange men," she instructs. (Later I learn that she was a teacher.) The woman has mistaken me for an adolescent but I appreciate the concern and make brief conversation. The next Halloween night it is cold and icy. When I reach my friend's house I tell her that a man offered me a ride and though the weather tempted my acquiescence, for the sake of practical safety I said, "no, thank you." Her husband sits in the corner chair reading a newspaper and sneers, "see, you can't be nice to you black women."

The glass is taken to the table where the rose awaits and I recall a visit.

I sit with my Anglo friend who is now newly and ecstatically married. She looks into my face and says, "you're so beautiful; I don't see how you could have ever thought you were ugly." And I remember the boys in my grade school classes who said I was ugly because I was too dark-complected to be considered "fine."

I lower the rose into the glass, careful to avoid the thorns. The mind continues to wander.

I am sitting in on a creative writing course in which there is an Appalachian woman who is about sixty-five years old. The woman has written a story of extraordinary quality and I am surprised because I yet harbor hideous stereotypes. On the last day of class she tells me in her deep southern accent, thickened by age, that I am young and talented and will make it. Then there comes something of rarity in my life: a flash of hope. I feel much different from the time when upon the instructor's reading one of my stories in class, a working-class, black man frowned disdainfully and replied, "that must be one of those kinds of women's stories."

The rose in its glass garnishes the middle of our tiny table.

"Thank you," I say to my roommate. Thank you all very much, I think.

AUDREY EWART

JOURNAL ENTRY: SILENCE, CULTURE, AND SLOW AWAKENING

February 11, 1978.
afternoon

I spent much of today in one of my moods, trying to do household chores but doing them rather poorly. My mind raced with thoughts aroused by Tom Tryon's *Harvest Home*. I kept thinking of Demeter, Mother Earth, Mother, mother; a group of women, a community, women in power, women in control, women determining, women determining together, together. . .

evening

I want to write; feelings twirling, swirling, tossing about inside, but no meshing, no coming together, no uniting. Feelings unidentified, chaotic; feelings not united to thoughts, ideas, words. What is this incomprehensible canvas filled with swirling colors: blues, reds, a few threads of yellow on a background of white (like a picture I saw the other day)—feelings boiling, churning, never escaping the pot of my soul?

I get moody, bitchy, angry. I want to be alone. For what? To feel the churnings again? Perhaps to put a name to all the threads of feeling that swirl around. Perhaps to find my center, my essence; to locate me and be with me; to know me, to understand me. Then, to be me, to live as me, and in doing so, to strip away the paddings, the armor that is me at this moment; to strip away the paddings and the armor that hide me from me.

I have no spark, no enthusiasm, no initiative. They have been wrested from me while I was quite small. I make no decisions; I make no choices. When I'm asked to exercise my initiative or make a decision I become befuddled, anxiety peaks. I have no wishes, no desires. They don't make themselves known to me anymore. They hide somewhere deep in my center; the center which is not accessible to me.

What I am is the grand work of all my parents and guardians. Each facet of me betrays something of them and from them. And when I feel something of which they did not teach; when I feel something from the depths of my own being; when part of me seeps through the armor that is me now; all I know is the feel of the chaos of multi-colored confetti.

The war is on: press down, contain yourself; explode, let go of yourself. Let self escape the binding ties of twenty-nine years of education and upbringing. Hold self in lest you can't control the blaze that erupts from the churning volcano lying dormant these many years; a volcano from which a few puffs of smoke slip out occasionally, almost escaping the vigilant eye of the sentries who still police their well-taught pupil.

Only a few puffs of smoke, gentle, airy, signalling that there's nothing left inside the volcano except the garbage which they threw down my hole to make me like them, like everyone else. The ashes of me remain under the garbage they piled upon me. The ashes remain, but deep, deep inside my hole, my crater, is my core which they could never reach.

My core, my center, my essence is there sending up insignificant puffs of smoke, occasionally, infrequently. But warning! Beware! My core, my center, my essence is warming up. Scraps and bits of nurturing, glowing cinders have accidentally entered my crater. The sentries thought them too insignificant to care. But they are burning through the garbage, firing my dormant core and turning it into molten rock-magma.

My core *is* getting warm, lighting up; illuminated, illuminating, ablaze, erupting, spewing forth their garbage which is now ash, spewing forth my blazing center. That molten rock outpouring as lava will create the mountain, the real me, to grow the way I want it to grow: green and lush, with cool, clear running water, quiet lakes, brown earth holding green trees whose frame is the blue sky; and in the trees singing melodious songs of truth are birds whose varied plumage reflects the color spectrum of the rainbow.

JONETTA

Jonetta and her friends were sitting at the familiar butcher block table playing their Friday night game of bid whist. This tradition was therapeutic. It not only provided space for them to share but also relaxed them after a typical 60 hour work week.

Skip finished her last swallow of beer. "Where's that damn red womon in love?" she asked. "I've got to make this bid—come on and help me partner. Fuck, we made it. They got 2 books."

"Gott damn," yelled Jonetta and Skip, slapping five.

"Ya'll bin sittin down too long now. Those seats are on fire but Pat and I are here to put it out—Smokey the Bear to the rescue," teased Denise.

Denise proceeded to exhibit her red and black meteor shower and made the bid with a six.

"We've put together a group of workers to negotiate with the union regarding their racism and sexism. Do you know any sisters interested in the skilled trades?" questioned Jonetta.

Denise crossed the Mass Ave. bridge into Boston* and quipped, "Girl, you must be kidding—that shit is too hard. You have to work—not just work, but hard work—plus go to school, just so someone can call you a journeyman. A man, dig that! Working the line is enough. The payoff is much more immediate—you know that. Now get up so we can play some real cards."

Jonetta pushed. "Look," she said, "as lesbians you have much more mobility and independence. You're prime to gain a marketable and resourceful skill for yourself and the struggle."

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*In the game of bid whist a Boston is made when one set of players obtains all the books of the game. A Cambridge is made when all the books are won but one.

"What struggle?" quipped Pat.

Skip jokingly responded, "You know. You know that struggle for the lesbian nation where the white girls run around imitating everybody but themselves."

"Let's not get on a white girl trip now," broke in Denise. "You all love to eat and kiss white ass anyway. By the way, Jonetta, I haven't seen you with anybody in months, other than those womin you hang around with who look like men and plot to overthrow the patriarchy. When are you going to find you somebody to love?"

Jonetta quickly responded, "Look, Denise, your shit is really out to lunch. That's not what it's about. There's much more to being with womin than having multiple orgasms."

Skip added, "You know all the sisters here in Dodge City and you still don't have anybody. You better move on over to the other side."

Jonetta was insulted and angry. She felt awkward for having initiated the conversation. "I can't deal with white womin. What do white folks know about racism, other than how to be racist and deny that it exists. That kind of teaching I don't want to do. Besides I don't like mountain climbing."

Pat slipped in, "But sisters are so cold and evil."

"Bitch, you sound like a hard leg. You had better check your shit. Stop talking this diarrhea and let's play cards," snapped Denise.

Pat smiled broadly and responded, "Just *squash* my shit sister."

* * * * *

Jonetta cruised into Rusty Pick-up. Smoke filled, dark pervading sensation of decadence, loud music and screams, faggots and perverse heterosexual men. She scanned the scene—so many beautiful womin. A dying forest with undergrowth fighting for existence.

All of the cliques were there in their favorite spots drinking, dancing and searching. Jonetta mingled among the various groups of lesbians, finding something to share with each. She knew many of the lesbians in their community, but they all knew her or knew *of* Jonetta. Lansing is a small town. Black lesbians are a rarity.

Marti, the factory dyke—short dark hair, work boots, flannel shirt, medium height with nice muscular thighs. Christine, of the pretty girl set—blonde, narrow waist, face and clothing out of *Mademoiselle,* awaiting womin to buy her drinks and ask her to dance. Aspiring capitalist, Penny—casually dressed in a style acceptable to both the straight and gay world. Coed Patti—obese, beautiful face and a synthetic "afro."

And oh, heart throb Rose Sunshine of the Red Dyke Army. Short cropped hair, red star on her blue jean vest lapel, lavender triangle on chest, olive skin, thin short stature. A striking womon—interesting and intelligent. Jonetta loved Rose Sunshine. Rose was a very thoughtful and creative womon. Jonetta respected Rose Sunshine immensely.

Rose and Jonetta hugged and kissed, exchanged the dry questions about how they'd been, danced, made plans to have breakfast in the morning and work on a collective statement regarding lesbian culture and racism and moved on.

Jonetta was approached by one of the aspiring capitalists, Jo, who worked with the local radical newspaper. Exchanging greetings and hugs Jo inquires, "How have you been? How's your love life?"

Jonetta responded, "Kind of lonely sometimes, but I'm coping well. I keep busy. I'm doing welding now and taking drafting, it's changeover—quite oppressive."

The white dyke followed with a monologue: "Damn it must really be hard being a Black lesbian. Black womin are so oppressed. I can't imagine what it would be like to be triply oppressed. I don't know too many Black lesbians. I've talked with even less. I can see how you could be lonely. But you should not limit yourself to Black lesbians."

Jonetta was filled with anger and rage. Her eyes watered and flamed as she glared at Jo and snapped, "I gave up men, not my culture."

The conversation changed to the weather until they both felt comfortable enough to leave.

Jonetta was a big Black lesbian, not fat but strong and powerful looking. Her family had migrated from New Orleans after the war. She had a short curly fro and copper colored skin, high cheek bones, dark piercing eyes, and strong long extremities—a beautiful womon. Jonetta had been out in this community for three years now. She continued to carry a mystique that forced womin to look in surprise and question when she walked into a room. For many of the white lesbians

she represented hidden sexual myths they had about Black womin—wanting to approach her but afraid of her Blackness and strength.

She had a history of numerous relationships with Black womin those first 2 years after ending a long relationship with a Black womon. Jonetta had plans for herself and a strong need to share her life with a womon. When she first came out she searched for other Black lesbians with whom she could share experiences.

After making the rounds of the Black womin, Jonetta spent almost a year alone—without a lover. She was a millwright apprentice at Olds, and spent a lot of her time struggling with mastering the skilled trades while learning to share a space with the white men who didn't want her there. Most of her intellectual energy was spent with the lesbians she knew from the Red Dyke Army. These friendships she found productive and challenging.

Jonetta struggled with the issue of being alone as a Black lesbian and had found some comfort and acceptance with it, but she missed an intimate relationship. She met Patti at the Rusty Pick-up. Meaningful conversations at the bar were close to impossible, but Patti and Jonetta talked there for hours about white lesbian/feminist art—Robin Morgan, Marge Piercy and Adrienne Rich. Patti did not know anything about Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde or Toni Morrison, and she did not seem to be too open to hearing what Jonetta had to say about them. She did know someone who had read *Sula,* though, and commented that they didn't like it. Jonetta thought to herself that the womon probably had not been able to relate to Morrison's use of Black female culture in her novel.

Jonetta saw problems with Patti's racism, but she still wanted to pursue a friendship with her because she was interesting, intelligent and stimulating. They spent evenings together drinking wine and teas, discussing literature, politics and life. Jonetta felt safe with Patti. For the first time Jonetta was ready to become intimate with a white womon.

* * * * *

Patti drove up and down Logan in her '67 VW, passing unfamiliar churches, store fronts and homes. The few times she had been on this avenue was only to pass through to a destination beyond the Black community. It was all quite foreign to her since she was not accustomed to interacting with Black people and could not find Jonetta's address. She stopped at a gas station to ask a white man to interpret Jonetta's directions.

Jonetta lived on the top floor of a handsome old frame house with a wonderful large front porch. Patti entered Jonetta's apartment. They greeted, then Jonetta asked Patti to make herself at home and cool out—dinner would be ready in a minute.

Patti looked around the apartment surveying Jonetta's antique oak furniture (passed down from relatives), a wall of photos of Third World children; wood and brass sculpture from West and South West Africa; drawings and paintings of Bearden, Judith Jamison and Ida B. Wells; family photos; shelves of books on womin, African history, Black literature, math and political theory—Cabral, Marx, Mao, Du Bois, and Malcolm X. Patti stepped into a utensil filled kitchen and watched Jonetta fry the chicken. "Isn't that going to be too much seasoning?" she questioned. "I think you may enjoy it," smiled Jonetta as she pulled a country garden—lettuce, cabbage, broccoli, mushrooms, cauliflower, radishes, tomatoes, carrots, cheese, onion and zucchini—out of the ice box and placed it on the round walnut table with a blue batik print table cloth. They shared dinner and conversation.

After dinner they read poetry together and made love. Patti's long stringy hair flowed across Jonetta's curves—a sensation Jonetta would have to learn to enjoy. Patti played with Jonetta's fro. "Your hair—what is that?" Jonetta laughed loudly and replied, "Grease."

* * * * *

They made love on many occasions. It was awkward for Jonetta and she did not enjoy it. Patti felt inept and Jonetta felt like a stud. Jonetta got drunk one night and looked at Patti's nakedness. She was soooo white—she looked like a ghost.

They drifted apart.

WHAT CHOU MEAN *WE*, WHITE GIRL?

OR, THE CULLUD LESBIAN FEMINIST DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE (DEDICATED TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL WOMEN ARE NOT EQUAL, I.E. IDENTICAL/LY OPPRESSED)

Preface:
I bought a sweater at a yard sale from a white-skinned (as opposed to Anglo-Saxon) woman. When wearing it I am struck by the smell–it reeks of a soft, privileged life without stress, sweat, or struggle. When wearing it I often think to myself: this sweater smells of a comfort, a way of being in the world I have never known in my life, and never will. *It's the same feeling I experience walking through Bonwit Teller's and seeing white-skinned women buying trinkets that cost enough to support the elderly Black woman elevator operator, who stands on her feet all day taking them up and down, for the rest of her life. It is moments/infinities of conscious pain like these that make me want to cry/kill/roll my eyes suck my teeth hand on my hip scream at so-called radical white lesbian/feminist(s) "WHAT CHOU MEAN WE, WHITE GIRL?"*[1]

* * * * * * *

Ain't they got no shame?
Naw, they ain't, I thought for the ninetieth time in as many days
as she asked me long distance from California to pay my way
to Indiana, Arkansas,
or some other Black goddess forsaken place to be on a panel
a set up
THE BLACK/LESBIAN/FEMINIST/CRITIC
because *they* want to represent Third World women and lesbians
on *their* feminist criticism panel
and I'm *such* a convenient package.
I knew it was coming when she said "You don't know me,
but I got your name from. . ."
They never know us,
selecting their victims from a rollodex labeled feminists, Black
or lesbians, Black

or better still, lesbian feminists, Black
a list I'm convinced some white girl is selling
and has made enough money from
to retire with a Swiss bank account
an index of Black women, feminists, lesbians
literate ones who don't eat white women or bite their heads off
or say "That's irrelevant to my struggle as a Black woman,"
or "The women's movement is a white girl trip,"
or "Are you a bull dyke?" or "Get out of my face, bitch!"
when feminism is mentioned to them.
It is a list that entitles its members to junk conversations and calls
at any hour of the day or night: "Would you, could you, we're having
a women's conference,
meeting, caucus, workshop, business, magazine, party, _____,* revolution
and we'd really like some Third World women to be there.
Don't come as you are,
but as we'd like you to be; our worst fantasy/primal nightmare, our best dream.
Something like Flo Kennedy or Pat Parker is what we had in mind.
It's not a costume affair,
but you get to be THE BLACK/THIRD WORLD/FEMINIST/LESBIAN/
WOMAN.
We'll try not to think you're politically incorrect, straight, or bourgeois
because you look decent.
Bring your own food because you won't be able to eat ours.
There probably won't be any. We know food is *real* important to you people.
For sure. And, naturally, we can't pay you for your services
because we're struggling revolutionaries
(don't mind our Volvo's, country houses, town apartments, health centers,

*Third World women may fill in the latest white women's activity they have been invited to legitimize.

stores, magazines, universities—they're part of the revolution.)
Would you mind sharing with us what it's like to be a Black woman/
Third World lesbian/
feminist/activist/writer/artist/revolutionary in twenty minutes or less?
That's all we have time for.

Yes, I/we do mind.
Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if you could make a living from it,
or even pocket change.
Print up cards:
Tired of people asking why there weren't any Third World women at that eve
Local Black woman available to be representative token Black feminist/lesbia
(for greater profit one must play the white straight feminist and lesbian circui
at parties (You don't want your friends to think you don't know any
Third World women.
So *politically incorrect.) meetings, marches, and relationships*
(after dinner dates
and escorts time and ½ over time). Tax deductible.
Liven up that dull study group with real life adventures of Black women!
See what it's like to be doubly or triply oppressed (depending on the circuit).
Discounts available for standing engagements, long term sexual relationships,
friendships,
and annual gatherings.

I am so tired of talking to others
translating my life for the deaf, the blind,
the "I really want to know what your life is like without giving up
any of my privileges
to live it" white women
the "I want to live my white life with Third World women's style and
keep my skin/class
privileges" dykes
So this is an open letter to movement white girls:
Dear Ms Ann Glad Cosmic Womoon,
We're not doing that kind of work anymore
educating white women
teaching Colored Herstory 101

on the job, off the job, in bed
in bed
letting lesbian/feminist racial transvestites
radical chic European dykes wearing pouches and multiple earrings
with no libations for Black female spirits
pick our brains steal our culture, style, identities
for free or below the minimum wage (for the revolution, of course)
while we wonder where the next meal, job, payment on our college loans
and other bills,
apartment, the *first* car, Black woman-identified bookstore, health center,
magazine,
archives, bar, record company, newspaper, press, forty acres and a mule,
or national conference
are going to come from.

They will come
from us loving/speaking *to* our Black/Third World sisters, not *at* white women
They will come
from us taking the Black woman energy presently being used to legitimize
your movement
and fighting to create and maintain our own Black women's culture,
our own Black feminist movement,
our own Third World lesbian nation.
They will come
from our strength, our fatigue and anger at always being a misunderstood,
overworked,
undervalued part of someone else's program. For free.

They will come
when we separate the Third World woman-identified Third World women
from the white woman-identified Third World women
when we Black woman-identified Black women leave the
white woman-identified Black women
those who can't come to their Black female senses
who won't deal with real sista love
way behind
you know the ones
who don't really like themselves or other Black women

the ones who've accepted and glorify in myth roles
Black bull dyke stud or Black lesbianfeministgoddesstokenstar
of the white women's community
modern day political and apolitical minstrels in colored girl face
The radical Black ones who insist that "the personal is political"
applies to everything
except their succession of white woman lovers or their lifetime one
We will leave them
in the fitting company of those white women
who maintain that the counter-revolutionary political incorrectness
of an oppressed group
(like women) giving their vital energy to their oppressors (like men)
applies to everyone
except the never ending succession of Third World woman lovers/friends
giving their vital energy to white women like them

Can I get a witness
to testify about the ones with a jones for Black pussy
who would be scorned as racist dogs if they were heterosexual white men
instead of white lesbians hiding behind the liberal veneer of
equal bedroom opportunity
erotic affirmative action
when actually they are the reverse racists
another white dyke doesn't stand a chance of qualifying under
their sexual guidelines
The ones who haven't done much of anything for Black liberation
since the 60's
except giving up Black men to sleep with Black women
Not much of a sacrifice considering the men they chose.
The white girls who play ethnic upswomanship
speak Spanish more fluently than native Hispanic women
are well versed in Black female english and dances
dress dyke chic and curl or wrap their hair get deep tans in the summer
all to better attract Third World lesbians with paler versions of ourselves

Our Third World lesbian spaces will come
from those of us who are remembering in increasing numbers
that imitation versions don't make it

(like choosing androgynous boys instead of handsome women)
or as Aretha pointed out
"Ain't nothin like the real thang"
real Black women loving real Black women
real Third World sista love between real Third World sistas
They will come
from conferences like the one I'm on my way to now
Black lesbian writers
Third World women artists from all over
meeting, joining forces, sharing sista energy
speaking to our own experiences and sensibility
without having to explain anything to each other
because we are each other's lives and words[2]

They will come
from Third World women's spaces I've been a part of
places where dozens of us make Black female communities
plan our movement
strategize about the oppression of Black people Black women
Black lesbian feminists
greasin for days havin passionate affairs with each otha
bein loud, rowdy and our natural cullud selves
be lovin ourselves be for real
be praisin the BLACK GODDESS
be makin revolution for *us*
be gettin a taste of Black dyke heaven
be wantin needin a steady diet of it
be plannin to have it

When I asked her for money she said
"We're not the M.L.A."[3]
I thought:
Black women/lesbians/feminists don't even have a M.L.A. to *not* be.
We will
Have each otha's sista love/work/selves
All the time
Beginning here

NOTES

[1] The phrase "infinity of conscious pain" as a metaphor for the Black female experience originated in Zora Neale Hurston's novel, THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD.

[2] This poem was written while I was traveling to the first annual Third World Lesbian Writers conference, 24 February, 1979, New York City, N.Y.

[3] The Modern Language Assocation, the oldest national professional organization for college English teachers.

MINORITY

I am the downtrodden
I am the poor and deprived
that got star billing for a decade

I am the snarl of Afro hair and mulatto mouth,
a frantic dancer of defiance in my
sun-raped wrappings reminiscent of some
racial home denied me by the
cataracts of time

I am the mind that is a
terrible thing to waste, the blacker berry
with the sweeter juice, the Matriarch of
impromptu families and the automatic suspect
for light-fingered crimes

mine is not a People of the Book/taxed
but acknowledged; their distinctiveness is
not yet a dignity; their Holocaust is lower case

I am dream blown and anchored by anger,
a switchblade of frustration, a
time bomb of hunger and pain;
I am reason ravaged and bone cold

I feel life glide through me like a sinister lynx
angling for deep shadows and I know
I am endangered but I am not only prey;
I recall cat rhythms and the sleek expanding muscle slide
of limbs night-hunting their existence

hatred is my curved compassion
I am tender
I am proud

Editors' note: The editors of *Conditions: Five* went through a difficult process in deciding to publish "Minority" because of the way in which it raises issues about political and personal relationships between Black and Jewish people, particularly Black and Jewish women. Feminists are currently confronting the problems of both racism and anti-Semitism in the women's movement. As a result of the discussion initiated by this poem, we and the ongoing editors of *Conditions* feel that it is important to encourage dialogue between Black and Jewish women. The ongoing editors plan to publish an article based upon one such discussion in a forthcoming issue of *Conditions.*

fragments of myself/the women
whom i love
a glint of wit, a shard of laughter,
broken-soul unease, all
mirror me

Narcissus shattered
long before conception
sees the barest glimmer,
longs completely

the loneliness
of knowing no reflection;
is it any wonder
that i touch them

THE DREAM

I watch you and realize:
You are the one in that dream
That dream of six years ago,
The one I could not interpret.
I did not know you then
Nor did I know you were possible.

I went through those years looking for you,
Not knowing I was searching
Only being aware of something missing
That I knew I had to find.

Yet when I found you, I was not sure you were the one.
When we touched my body knew
Yet after the touch, I was afraid:
Suppose you were still a dream?

"This is the one," my mind, my heart said to me
But I dared not believe because I wanted you so.
What if you weren't real?

But you were
For in the morning's light you were still form and figure
And warm, soft flesh.

You are the woman I knew would come.

BECKY BIRTHA

At 20, I began to know
I wanted to grow
Up to be a woman.
Sensed the power in that word
"Woman" like no one I knew
To look up to

At 23 I stood in a city field
And reeled out 700 feet of string–
Take a good look–
You've never seen
Anyone like this before
Nor will you soon again–
    brown-skinned woman
    in a long skirt
    her kite flying higher
    than any of the men–

At the poetry workshop
I'm the woman across the room from you
Take it in:
    she's in a soft pink peasant shirt
    under her overalls
    pinned in the center pocket
    that symbol for women loving women
    print kerchief tied behind
    brown face, brown eyes intent
    on the woman who's speaking
    drinking it in, saying yes
    while her fingers never stop
    knitting a small blue mitten
    the size of a little girl's hand
I look up to
All your lovely faces watching me
Yes, I am exactly what you see
My card is strength.
I am the woman I always wanted to be.

MARIA DE LAS ROSAS

I go to visit her where she stays–
2 miles across town–
walking
carry a gathering of brambly wildroses
the color of cream

it takes me all day to get there
the petals brown around the edges
the petals hang limp
the wind scatters some of them in the street
I carry them heads down
not to let the life run out

when I arrive she laughs and says she has
a houseful of roses
lets me in.
her man is gone off someplace,
so I can stay

I tell her about the women I saw on the street
how I look at women wanting to love them.
she says she can't see women that way.
I tell her I'm learning to touch people now
she says it must be nice.

she's made a potato casserole,
invites me to stay for dinner
it's hot, but she won't eat
until her man comes home.
I decide not to wait

when I go, she takes a red rose from a water glass
and gives it to me
to smell on the way home.
I can't hug her when I say goodbye
but we both try to smile

a block away, I stop before a window
bite off the stem and
put the rose in my hair.
it smells like her.

BEFORE I DRESS AND SOAR AGAIN

I have a question for all the sisters
who love their sons
named for fallen revolutionaries
This is not addressed to all
the manless mothers of sons,
just the ones who are as queer as I am
and very nice for other people:
a smile for every little boy who cries
and an eye roll for me
as they dip into my blood and bone
to paint pretty pictures on their young ones' diapers
Let me offer it to you before those bad boys
bring it home from a day's hunting
It's such a waste,
smeared on their shirt sleeves,
wiped on their pants
or kicked under their shoes
They tend to get careless
and you, who can shape the lift you gave,
get locked in closets
dressed to kill every woman in sight
with fine vines and sharp feathers
You turn away from the windows,
locked in the tower
while through the woods
your sisters call for you
The boy child has learned well
to cling and keep you there
Why have you shown him the way
to pull at the wings
and stop the wide stroke
of your lesbian angel
courage?
How can your daughters grow?

UP IN THE SKY

Twofers.
That's what they call us
we're good enough to count on both
the quotas
worth our weight in gold and federal funding
but not when it comes to a pay check
and superwomen that we are
    –had to be
    and this is just a typing job–
we're supposed to do the man's work for him,
sit pretty while he believes in his lies
and lick the platter clean
Twofers.
Multi-media presentation is closer to the truth
everybody's everything when you get right down to it
and catching hell all the way home
People sneak under our robes
for confessionals in the dark
when the lights are low
and things are kept to anxious whispers,
they want us to hurry up to the back door
the party is over and done with
and the dishes are more than a body can handle
so a miracle worker is called upon,
to wipe away all their sins
It's the brown skin girls who stay home
and mind baby
everybody else can go away
on a sailing boat
out to the country or off to the wars
to find the important things in life
but God made Black women
as the one essential for your home

A wide range of colors fit for
live-in maid, mammy, chief cook and bottle washer
and good hands with the children,
aged parents, house plants, and egos–
anything that needs love and nurture
We pushcart the fountain of youth
keeping never never land in good supply
People think that there's no end to our goodness,
that they can suck up all they like
and keep knocking nails on the cross
But this is no half-price student jamboree
the share-cropping season is over
and the martyr positions are burned out
We don't operate on those principles anymore
we defied gravity from the jump and will not
continue to hang ourselves up
Never mind the third day resurrection
bump the fall to the earth
like some ripe fruit
to be spread apart
for them to pick up and taste sweetness
they'll print "equal opportunity"
but serve up 99 years
that's more than enough cold steel
to slam in anyone's face.

THE WEDDING

The following is based on writing I did during the weekend of my friend J---'s wedding in 1975. J--- and I met each other in September 1974 when we were beginning graduate school in public health. The fact that we were the only two Afro-American women in our class helped bring us together and we were "best friends" for much of our first year. J--- was engaged to be married when we met. I had been married about 3½ years in March, 1974 when I left my husband.

Part of the significance of this writing to me is that I did it a few months after I began to consciously realize myself as a lesbian. This writing was also done before I had been involved in a lesbian sexual relationship. I am fascinated by what it reveals about my development as a lesbian. It's also important to me because it tells something about the juxtapositions of living as a Black woman who is both lesbian and feminist.

The type of writing that is here, journal writing, is something I have done since my first or second year of college. A major impetus for this writing for me has been my need to make sense of my life and to manifest my life in writing. It is a survival tool. As I wrote in this journal, "The only way I've kept my sanity is by writing every chance I get."

I burned all the journals I'd kept up to that time during the second year of my marriage, partly because I felt I had no safe place for them away from my husband and partly because one of my duties in that marriage was to forget who I had been before it. I did not keep a journal again until about a month before I left him. Much of that journal has to do with the process of leaving and I feel that I literally wrote my way out of the marriage. I am grateful that our movement has provided me with a safe place for these words.

August 22, 1975 7:10 P.M.
At the Rehearsal

I'm in the bathroom trying to get down some notes on this mess. . . . I feel so cynical, so frustrated, almost hysterical and bored.

The "cast" is from the Black bourgeoisie, Frazier would have loved it.[1] No one has real faces. I was looking at the women and thinking of our friends' faces, the spirits that reveal themselves there, Demita particularly. God, I wish I had one friend here. Someone who knew me and would understand how I feel.

I am masquerading as a nice, straight, middle-class Black "girl." I changed into my costume in a dressing room at Penn Station. A beige "big dress," earrings, a scarf.

August 23, 1975 2:00 A.M.
At Mrs. Brown's

[Mrs. Brown was a neighbor of J———'s family with whom I stayed.] I'm now in a place that unlike the one above is totally familiar. The room I'm staying in reminds me of the first places of my childhood. . . . the ambience created by an old Black lady. Dark old furniture and photographs. A picture of FDR above one of Martin Luther King. Two pictures of Jesus and several of trains—from when trains were important.

* * * *

This whole scene is unbearable. The rehearsal dinner was awful. I abhor these tight, proper, nasty-nice people. There were Black servants. A maid, a cook, a waiter, and a bartender.

I can't go on. All of a sudden I feel nauseated.

August 23, 1975 8:00 A.M.

. . . Back to the wedding. I loathe the heterosexual assumption of it all. I can imagine how these people would act if they knew that I was a dyke. It's funny, I've been questioning my right to classify myself as such. ("Right." Most people would see that concept as absurd.) But in a context like this I realize that it's correct.

Why am I so upset? Because I realize now. . . that in some sense I want J——— for myself. I am shocked as I write this, but it is true. My dream helped me see this and as I sat at that deadly party last night waiting for J——— to arrive (she's been late to everything so far, the rehearsal, the dinner—a clue?) I thought about this, about the dream I had this week. In the dream I was in the front seat of a car and J——— was in the back. I kept asking her whether she was all right and she assured me that she was. She put her arms around me over the back of the seat and kissed my face. She got into the front seat and just as we were

starting to talk and were getting ready to drive off Terry came up to the car. Of course I was furious. This morning when I woke up I thought of that dream and particularly of what Terry meant in it. Of course he represented men in general and more specifically H———. (The names are similar, perhaps coincidental in the dream context, but everything about the two is symbolically identical.) I realized that Terry was the first male to come between Barbara and me. . . . I remember how hurt I was by all those goings on.

She is irretrievably lost to me and I to her. She's getting married and since I'm a dyke I am anathema to her. She's made her feelings on homosexuality clear on several occasions. [I no longer use the terms homosexual or homosexuality to refer to lesbians.]

Two last things and then I'll stop. Last night I was on the second floor after going to the bathroom (I must have gone four times, I was hiding and trying to maintain my sanity). I went into a bedroom where J——— and three of her bridesmaids and Susan (the wife of a friend of H———'s) were talking. J——— was talking about what still needed to be done and about her feelings concerning the wedding. Mostly anxieties over whether everything would go well. But at one point she said something to the effect that "It seems strange. We've been together all our lives (her three friends) and after tomorrow we won't be." Her friends assured her that they'd still be a part of her life. Ha! I know better. She'll be H——'s chattel from now on. It occurred to me that celebrating a marriage is like celebrating being sold into slavery. Yes, I'm overgeneralizing (I'm only 90-95% right); but in this case I feel sure.

One piece of evidence for the above. At the rehearsal yesterday J——— was on the fourth floor shouting to someone. H——— yelled up to her, "J———, don't shout!" J——— replied, defending herself, and H——— interrupted her by saying sharply, "J———!" as if he were reprimanding a child or a dog. I was sick. This is the essence. He will try to make her into his slave, his child, in short, his wife.

I must stop now. Mrs. Brown just brought in a clock, not wanting me to be late. Did I mention that this is frightfully badly organized? Everything is chaos. But I have no doubt it will come off. Unfortunately.

At the Reception 6:35 P.M.

I'm sitting on the floor of the first floor bathroom. I'm so tired of this. I wish I had somewhere to go, a movie, or a friend. Of course I don't have the latter and I don't have enough money to pay for the

former. I wonder how long before I'm discovered, *i.e.*, before someone wants to use the bathroom. Fortunately there're not many people on this floor.

I feel so out of place. Twinges of self-pity. I haven't felt like this in a long time—since before I began to create my life.

I am so overwhelmed by the fact that heterosexuality is so omnipotent and omnipresent (though certainly not omniscient!). Not only is it casually taken for granted but it is celebrated as in this bacchanal, announced in the *New York Times*. And homosexuality is so hidden and despised. Homosexuals go through torturous soul-searching, deciding whether they should come out. Heterosexuals get announcements printed. . . .

Of course this is not the only source of my dislocation. All of this represents a lifestyle I abhor. This is nothing more than a Black emulation of the super-rich. A catered affair with a vengeance.

How could anyone with a social conscience or just simple common sense perpetrate something like this?

I've gravitated towards the "servants" both today and last night. They are about the only people with whom I feel comfortable. Precisely because they are clearly not a part of this. I hardly know anyone here and the only person I care about is J———. This is the kind of jive socializing that we've always hated—the kind that made Aunt LaRue call us "anti-social."

I keep thinking of the Meg Christian song, "The Hive."[2] . . . I keep thinking of Mrs. Brown. I wonder is she as lonely as she seems. If I'm not mistaken she's the woman who used to take care of J——— when she was a child. J——— came over this morning to get me and she hugged Mrs. Brown and said goodbye to her. J——— cried and I began to cry too. I went into the bedroom so they wouldn't see. I'm not allowed to cry. No one would understand. People would wonder. After all, as a woman this type of event should make me happy. After all, J——— has achieved the supreme goal of any "real woman." Not only is she married but her husband is a Harvard Law School graduate. A fine young man.

I find myself hoping that this might be the rare, good marriage for J———'s sake, but I'm skeptical.

At the Reception 10:25 P.M.

The crowd has thinned considerably. I don't have much more to say. I'm played out. Maybe I can escape soon. I want to prepare for the meeting and I don't want to be as exhausted as I was at the last one. [I was meeting with a group in Manhattan the next day to work on the creation of the Gay Caucus in the American Public Health Association.]

I just had a long conversation with Art, one of the bridesmaids' husbands. . . . H———reintroduced me because I committed the horrible sin of sitting by myself, not talking with anyone. . . .

. . . one thing he [Art] said that I totally disagree with is that interest group politics (defined by ethnic group or gender) are not ultimately productive. The larger women's movement and Black feminism come out of broader, supposedly comprehensive movements whose net result was to fuck women over.

It's fine to coalesce on common issues but the plain fact is we don't want what they want. At least half of the people (men) in this country don't want women to live. Approximately eighty per cent could care less about Black people. Ninety per cent (who really knows?) are adamantly opposed to homosexuality. So who is going to fight for our lives but us? . . .

The next day I managed "to escape from Queens." I had decided before I went to sleep that "damn it, the good dyke thing to do was to get to the city by myself" and not depend on J———'s father to drive me. I had told him that I wanted to leave early to get on the train. The actual reason was that I needed to get to my meeting. After the meeting I took the train back to Boston.

I have kept the writing I did that weekend, some of it on the backs of the printed wedding program in a worn white envelope labelled "The Wedding," for the last four years. Soon after the wedding I read parts of what I'd written to Lorraine Bethel, one of the editors of this Black women's issue of Conditions. *She said it sounded like perhaps I could make it into an article. That seemed like an extremely remote possibility then since I had never published anything before. But her comment always made me think of this writing as a potential article—maybe. In March, 1978 our third Black feminist retreat was held in Boston. I had not read "The Wedding" in some time. I was afraid to*

look at it. Afraid that it couldn't be made into an article because it wasn't good enough. As a result of the support and inspiration of being with the women the first evening of the retreat I got up the courage to read what I had written the next morning as I rode the subway to our meeting place. I told some of the women about this experience that day.

I know these were crucial steps in the creation of this article. There have been many other contributors to this process. My sister Barbara Smith's encouragement and nudging has been essential. I include this description because I would like other women to know something of how I managed to get this into print and how important other women's help was to me. One hope I have is that after reading this other women, especially Black women, will be enspirited to tell their own essential stories.

NOTES

[1] E. Franklin Frazier, a Black sociologist, published *Black Bourgeoisie*, a book highly critical of the Black middle class in 1957. (Free Press, New York).

[2] "The Hive" is a song Meg Christian sings about the hypocrisy and terror of a wedding. ©1974 Jimmy Webb (Canopy Music ASCAP), from *Meg Christian: I Know You Know*, Olivia Records.

FOR A GODCHILD, REGINA, ON THE OCCASION OF HER FIRST LOVE

i.

Blood sister,
our fingers join beneath the veins
beneath the skin
where the secret blood
dams the heart's flow

We stand in the same dream
(the mind of moon
evaporates like wind)
we smear blood over our thick
red lips
we smear blood under our heavy breasts
it is our baptism, our commitment
to each other's souls—
From this day
may we go under the fountains of our lives
locked in blood

ii.

how the light shines through your skin!
what glorious red & purples
light has taught me—
a cage of crystal in the sun
is not more beautiful
than your dark body

iii.

I watch the light
that pumps your heart
I worship whatever dream
made you appear on this earth
& walk in your own
solitary way

Once I stood at the baptismal font
I held you in my arms not knowing
what breast I held against my breast
I saluted God in your place
& promised to stand
in the path of your fire

Now I am afraid
you may go down
under the weight
of blood–
pushing on your head–

you may drown
3 times
(as I did)
before you die
& come back in my arms again

iv.

Sister,
do not marry
to forget
do not have children
to own your own life
do not marry a man
to wave you in the wind
like his banner

If I am asked to the wedding
I will come like The Good Witch
& bring a gift to rouse you
after Beauty bows to the needle
& sleeps a hundred years:

Come where we may speak
& pump away our griefs
without sex
we will climb as on a swing
& walk under the cool trees

THE NIGHTMARE IS

The nightmare is
TO WAKE UP
In a world of feeling only *my* sadness,
Knowing only *my* madness
My pain, *my* shame and *my* fear.

The nightmare is
TO WAKE UP
Knowing only my thirst, my scent, my face,
My thrill, my joy, my space
My considerations, my conditions, my case.

The nightmare is
TO WAKE UP
Waiting to be touched, never thinking of another's
Wanting to be touched.

The nightmare is
TO WAKE UP
Living with all my favorite things
In a one room house
Whose windows are mirrors,
Never really ever seeing out
Never really looking out
Only making contact when the grocery man delivers
Or the roter-router man arrives.

The nightmare is
TO WAKE UP
On the telephone
Explaining my self, describing my self
Praising my self, recounting myself,
Virtuizing myself to Raggedy Ann
Who has long since been dead on the other end.

REFLECTIONS: ON BLACK FEMINIST THERAPY

From day to day, I, Black woman, continue to bear the brunt of racism and sexism, wherever I go. Oh, to be able to *choose* not to be confronted with one or the other, or both, on any given day—now, that would be the Life.

Who, then, can I turn to when I hurt real bad? I recall a spiritual that says ". . . no hidin' place down here." I find myself at therapy's doorstep. Will this counselor usher me to insanity? Because if she does not openly deal with the fact that there is a very low premium on every aspect of my existence, if she does not acknowledge the politics of Black-womanhood, now that would surely drive me nuts.

From minute to minute, I, Black feminist, move through phases of wallowing in, feeling, thinking about, talking about, analyzing the omnipresence of oppression in Black women's lives. I know, right down to my core, that Black women are inherently valuable. I live and work for the Life. And do we ever deserve it!

I have chosen, as a profession, to provide mental health services. I make a connection between Black feminism and the preciousness of Black women's psyches. I find myself face to face with Black women at therapy's door and let me tell you—what comes next is an intricate process indeed (including the sharing of it here in print).

From jump, a presumption that I discarded fast was that the dynamics of communication between two Black women as client and therapist would be easy as pie.

Who am I for this woman? Who is she for me? How does she see herself? Does she see herself? Am I able to see her?

Perhaps we're to work through the slave mentality she's been taught to cultivate. She's come in to turn in her Mammy-badge after having allowed everyone to feed off of her. Is that why she's so tired? Will she guard herself against me for fear of one more ounce of bottomless giving? Or will she fight me for caring since that's *her* lot, taking care of everyone but herself.

I'm reminded of my grandmother's death; at the wake, upon spotting her coffin through the open church doors, I screamed and yelled out her name. I was furious at her for leaving me behind. All of the love, all of the giving . . . I knew no one else could match it, not even me. Boy, oh boy! is that what killed her? My lesson that evening—as I was swooshed out as spontaneously as I had yelled for all of us who have been silenced—was "you gotta be strong." My self, as was each of our pitiful Black selves, being asked to stretch out even further than she. What was needed most was a drawing-closer. How much is too much? If you're a Black woman, is there such a concept? I don't know. We discover together.

She's the lesbian who, having been rejected by an old-neighborhood friend, may be expecting me to assume that if she just had a man, happiness would follow. Or, she could be the rejecting friend who wants reassurance from me that homophobia is righteous.

Will she think that I'm a lesbian, too? What if I am? Sensitivity. To tap into my anger and sadness in the face of hysterical/historical rejection by significant others and to know why the rejection comes. To share the scariness in loving someone just like myself. Timing. "You mean, it's not crazy, or anti-nationalistic for me, a Black woman, to admit that I do in fact love Black women?" Clarity . . . maybe. Perhaps it's too painful, or too joyful.

Was she ever a child, this Black woman who now dares herself to cry? Her anger for crying is as fierce as her tears. She tells me, annoyed, how "they cry over the least little thing." What I hear is: "Would you let me just sit here and cry with you? You won't think me silly, weak or childish, will you?"

Her mother could not tolerate a sickly child because her own undernourished herstory had not given her the strength to deal with the disaster of illness, so she was given up. She learned to be tough and self-sufficient. She remembers no one demanding her tears' retreat. No one. The tears never came. "Shut your mouth girl or I'll give you something to cry about." I shudder at the memory. She laughs for the chance to be able to cry.

What of the Black woman whose mother could "pass" for white, thus raising her confused? Her family continues in vain to search for the white way to be. She flips her straight hair in the face of my Afro. Offhandedly, she tells me how people she looks up to really despise "niggers" whose talk and dress is not polished—particularly dark-skinned, Southern

ones. I seek a moment to tell her that I sense her pain in being there with me, that I see her pressing need to push me away. ("I'll reject you before you reject me.") "Not that I'm interested for myself, but, could you tell me where they're giving the Black-woman test? Would you help me cram for it? There isn't much time." This woman could discover her Black-womanself in a support group with other isolated Black women. She might begin to trust that there are no requirements.

Certainly self-hatred, in one form or another, is what brings Black women to therapy. How many Black women, in the course of our lives, could unequivocally withstand the assaults on our very existence? We could sue society for nonsupport except for its "support" in teaching us the oppressive process of internalizing racism and sexism, *i.e.*, self-hatred. To cite an example: the recent Boston murders of twelve Black women (the last woman—stabbed-to-death by her male "lover" this morning). The message we're getting is that it's commonplace to beat, stab, burn, mutilate us and literally take our lives away. What's all the fuss? They weren't worth anything anyway. (". . . no hidin' place down here.") Black women are feeling scared, humiliated, angry, and depressed. In, and out of, therapy they share their own untold herstories of violence against them—even women I thought I knew. Some male-identified Black women are denying the reality of the murders and how it's sucking all of us under. How painful the connection must be to share the horror of a rape (by a Brother) while pregnant (by a Brother and close-to-term). She then must deny that any Black man could possibly be connected to this mess, must somehow deny the hurting reality of her oppression by Black men. Other women come in angry at me, and very defensive at being confronted with who they are, and what this means. Yet they continue to come because they must know.

What is Black feminist therapy for Black women? There is no pat answer. We are a complicated people as is our way of relating. I know one thing for sure and that is that the exchange and sorting out of herstories, much like our foremothers' oral tradition, is essential. Groups, much like our foremothers' kinship networks, are essential. The sharing of our spiritual energy, much like old-time religion, is essential. Black feminist analysis, much like our foremothers' understanding of being Black, being a woman, being "had," *i.e.*, living under racist patriarchy, is essential. I often wonder why older Black women don't present themselves in therapy. Sure, our mothers, aunts, and grandmothers may be tired. . . from giving and giving and giving; but take this constant giving away from an older Black woman. . . is that what craziness would be for them?

My mother, upon hearing my career decision, stated that it was better not to mess with that stuff, that is, with Black folks' minds. I listen. For an older Black woman, "therapy" may connote complete craziness in a hospital rather than a weekly session of unfolding. What can we give to each other, *and* get in return? Older Black women don't seem to remain in weekly therapy. How to unveil the layers and still survive. . . . They might return to a weekly get-together that's productive—to make something, to help someone out, to plan something, to exchange energy—much like the "clubs" of my grandmother's day, a preservation of our Black female culture.

Another Black woman's experience is being unheard, *i.e.*, the breeding of isolation, of unawareness (a major U.S. pastime gives us permission to be "crazy." Self-disclosure helps to keep the process of sanity alive. Yes, sanity, for Black women, for Black people everywhere, is a dynamic process. Self-disclosure, on the part of the therapist or the counselor, attempts to balance out yet another unequal power relationship in Black women's lives.

A basic premise in Black feminist thought is that the personal is political. Is it a coincidence that Black women on welfare learn to be ashamed, isolated, and silent? Is it an accident that Black lesbians remain hated and feared, thus maintaining invisibility? What of gay men who, in order to survive, become walking "fem" comedies for the Black community? What causes a Black woman to continue to struggle with Black men for mutual love and respect, in the face of overwhelming abuse, neglect, and misunderstanding? Why is it that Black people are generally able to tolerate differences in culture and race in such a racist society? What of the Black woman who speaks of her would-be-abortion-turned-sterilization without visible outrage? What causes Black folks to hang in there to re-explain and re-educate white folks about who we are and why we are?

For people of color, in general—for Black women, in particular—the interwoven pathology of racism, sexism, heterosexism/homophobia, and class oppression calls for the recreation of survival strategies. Given the origins, as it were, of Black people in this country, collective strategies for survival have always been the essence of our existence. Over the years, with some gains having been made—real and imaginary—the urgent call for collectivity has diminished. It's not surprising that in keeping with the U.S. agenda Black women have individualized and internalized the problems and causes of this loss of collective struggle. Thus, the strategies for survival have become less effective and less meaningful. As an "in-

dividual" struggle, each compromise seems and feels, in fact, to *be* a tradeoff.

Question: Why Black feminist therapy? Answer: Why Black women? Why Black people?

We seek our grandmothers' strengths, our great-grandmothers' strategies—we find our sources. We discover/recover ourselves.

FOR STRONG WOMEN:

Listen.
Sometimes, when you have innocently & mistakenly
overlooked your needs,
and planned 10 hours too many
alone,
And you wait,
on the verge of crying,
for someone or
    something to crack the silence
    in your room,
    to crack the silence that is consuming your body,
    and sits at the bottom of your throat,
    shallowly, shallowly breathing,
    waiting. . .

Listen.
When, surprise of surprises, you get the flu,
and you are crabby, and achey, and small,
it might dawn on you how shallow and controlled
your relationships have become
if no one,
    no one is worrying about you,
And you must go through this simple,
yet overwhelming period
alone;
such a strong woman,
reduced to fears & whiny tears,
and memories of a warm hand on your forehead,
and jello, and your mother checking on you.
All those simple, simple acts of giving
    you no longer have access to. . .
What is the world coming to?
What are you coming to?

Listen.
When you lose your keys, and the very continuance
of your whole world lies in those lost keys,
And you cannot manage
you cannot manage *anything* without them,
And you begin to get frantic, looking, tracing,
over and over the same places, frantically,
And your best friend, or your favorite lover comes in
to see you like this:
unjustifiably afraid,
unreasonable,
snappy, evil, and downright ugly. . .
Is it all in your mind?
All that fear?
all that fear becoming shame becoming anger?
What? Just lost keys?
Just the flu?
Just one more quiet evening alone?

I have needed some one to be kind to me,
like a sad, sad, misty & gray dream,
my hand outreached, waiting,
yet not believing I deserve anything. . .
For those simple times,
when I cannot take care of myself. . .
What?
What do we do?
What do you do?
WHAT CAN BE DONE
to ease the fear
& growing self-pity

(LIGHT A CANDLE/READ A BOOK/TAKE A LONG HOT BATH
MASTURBATE OR SMOKE A DOOBEE/TAKE A LONG HOT BATH)

Wait.

And tomorrow when there are people to comfort you,
or you find those damned keys,
Return to the same well versed competent woman you are.
Hold your head up.
Breathe deeply.
Return to your life unmarred, recovered and complete.

As though none of it ever happened.
As though none of it could ever happen.
Ever.

DEBRA

Debra and I are different. Fundamentally different.
Her life reads like the strong girl of a Black Baptist
family—all rooted in East Oakland.
And mine is the life of a rebellious radical of a color-
struck arrogant Catholic family beginning in
the East, now spread across the entire U.S.
I have my therapy and she has her Cadillac.

So what in the hell are we doing together?

I have answers to all her questions. And as long as I can
make her understand I am safe, for our differences will
remain intact. I do not wish to lose the delicate balance
of all the answers I have accumulated to all the questions
she will ask:
The whys of the black community
& an overbearing Momma.
The questions are natural for Debra. They are the ones she
was taught to ask, the same questions she asked herself
when she bought that gold Cadillac.
And they are the same questions I heard loudly in my head
when I went crazy, the same ones I could not answer when
I bought my first journal, or realized for the first
time I needed my 'space'.
The same questions I struggled to finally silence:
whatswrongwithyougirlareyoucrazy? youmustthinkyouwhiteorsomethin

And those differences sparked by those questions might explode
before us. Explode in the desperation of all the Black people
that have ever lived,
Explode and burn in all the emotion that comes from
class & color differences,
& real material limitations, & spiritual tricks played by a
supposed white god,
& white people themselves.

And just how difficult and tenuous it is to be black and stay
on this mother fucking planet, given the *real* circumstances.

It could blow us away
and apart.

But I love this woman Debra. I love her values and her fears.
I even love her Cadillac, as naturally and deeply as I
love being black.
And what ever explosions come between us are *of* us,
And that fire & burning is my *birthright,*
something I need to reaffirm my insights & myself
& every tear or smile I ever gave to any other Black
woman to say
It's true
It's real
This ain't no dream honey
Yeah
sometimes it got tah be dat way

BARBARA SMITH

NOTES FOR YET ANOTHER PAPER ON BLACK FEMINISM, OR WILL THE REAL ENEMY PLEASE STAND UP?

This paper was initially written in order to clarify some ideas for myself, as a result of attending an International Women's Day Program in 1976, sponsored by a Third World mixed-left sectarian group. That day the analysis of feminism was constantly rejected, the reality of patriarchy denied, and the phrase "men are not the enemy" repeated many times.

I do not consider the following to be anything but notes which have contributed to my own political thought and may contribute to the making of a more comprehensive analysis at another time. It is not high level theory but it is based upon a Black feminist evaluation of facts.

Black and other Third World women's relationships to the systems of oppression in this society are, by definition, different from those of other oppressed groups who do not experience both racial and sexual oppression at the same time. The effect of this double, actually triple oppression because of class, is not merely arithmetic–one plus one plus one–but geometric.* There is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual. A good example is forced sterilization of Third World women: racism and imperialism determine the racial or nationality group to be oppressed and sexism and misogyny determine that women are the appropriate targets for abuse.

The fact that we, as Third World women, face oppression specific to our combined racial, sexual, and class status means that we will also develop specific theory and practice in order to fight our oppression. Inherent in Black feminist analysis is the assumption that the white segments of the women's movement must also address, understand, and

*I would now also include Lesbian oppression as a force in Black women's lives. Not integrating an analysis of heterosexism into this paper when I wrote it in 1976 is a major drawback.

fight racism inside their ranks and in the society as a whole.

* * * *

Feminism is potentially the most threatening of movements to Black and other Third World people because it makes it absolutely essential that we examine the way we live, how we treat each other and what we believe. It calls into question the most basic assumption about our existence and this is the idea that biological, *i.e.,* sexual identity determines all, that it is the rationale for power relationships as well as all other levels of human identity and action. An irony is that among Third World people biological determinism is rejected and fought against when it is applied to race, but generally unquestioned when it applies to sex.

Rigid sex roles, sexism, and violence towards women seem entrenched in Black society and culture, perhaps even more deeply than in white society and culture as indicated by the fact that there has been so much resistance to the examination of our oppression until this point. Black and other Third World women are sexually oppressed every day of our lives, but because we are also oppressed racially and economically, sexual oppression has not been considered a priority. It has been rendered falsely invisible.

By naming sexual oppression as a problem it would appear that we would have to identify as threatening a group we have heretofore assumed to be our allies—Black men. This seems to be one of the major stumbling blocks to beginning to analyze the sexual relationships/sexual politics of our lives. The phrase "men are not the enemy" dismisses feminism and the reality of patriarchy in one breath and also overlooks some major realities. If we cannot entertain the idea that some men *are* the enemy, especially white men and in a different sense Black men too, then we will never be able to figure out all the reasons why, for example, we are being beaten up every day, why we are sterilized against our wills, why we are being raped by our neighbors, why we are pregnant at age twelve and why we are at home on welfare with more children than we can support or care for. Acknowledging the sexism of Black men does not mean that we become "man-haters" or necessarily eliminate them from our lives. What it does mean is that we must struggle for a different basis of interaction with them. That if we care about them and ourselves we will not permit ourselves to be degraded or manipulated.

I think there are many problems inherent in trying to reach a

viable Black feminist analysis of what goes on in Black women's lives. I want to briefly discuss two of them here.

The first is economics. I am in essential agreement with the Marxist analysis that it is our material conditions which most clearly affect what we are able to do in our lives. These determine to a huge extent the content and quality of our lives: for example, the amount of access we have to the basic necessities of food, clothing, housing and health care as well as what we are able to think, what we are taught to believe and what we are allowed to do. If, for example, a poor Black woman were no longer poor, she probably would no longer be a welfare mother. She would still, however, be a mother, suffering the sole responsibility for the care of her children, the isolation and overwork inherent in that role under patriarchy. She also might very well still be raped, beaten, sterilized, or pregnant against her will since these kinds of oppression are not solely motivated by economic causes. She would also still be Black whatever else occurred. Sexism and racism are inherently part of all that happens to Black women, indeed are just as central to our material conditions as class oppression.

I realize that little will change in our lives until capitalism is destroyed and economic conditions and relationships radically changed. I also realize that while struggling for survival we cannot always examine and fight all the forces that make our lives intolerable. But this does not mean that these forces do not exist. Therefore those of us who try to examine and fight these forces must not hesitate to do so merely in order to maintain political "correctness" and a false sense of solidarity. I do not believe that socialism will resolve political conflicts that do not spring solely from an economic root. It may provide an atmosphere in which these situations can be criticized and worked upon, but it does not appear to contain the answers to nor an analysis of phenomena which are based more directly in realms other than the economic. I think it is essential to struggle against sexism and racism just as we struggle against economic oppression. These are not trivial oppressions but very real ones which pre-date capitalism and therefore will not necessarily disappear when capitalism disappears.

The second major problem is how we think about men. White males are the primary oppressor group in American society. They oppress Black people, they oppress working people, they oppress women, they oppress Black women. They also oppress each other. To say that men are not the enemy, that it is instead the ruling class is sophistry. In this country, white men *are* the ruling class, the ruling class *are* white men. It is true that not all white men are capitalists or possess extreme class privilege, but it is safe to assume that $99\frac{44}{100}\%$ of them

are racists and sexists. It is not just rich and powerful capitalists who inhibit and destroy life. Rapists, murderers, lynchers, and ordinary bigots do too and exercise very real and violent power because of their white-male privilege.

One can endlessly make fine distinctions about who the oppressors really are. For me a workable and general definition of an oppressor is the person(s) who takes away your freedom. This means the person may be of the same class as you (your husband, your parents, your neighbors, strangers); the same race as you (your husband, your parents, your neighbors, strangers); and even the same sex as you (a racist or class exploiter). The identity of the oppressors we face in our day-to-day lives is fluid and constantly changes. We may all oppress someone. Refusing to name persons as oppressors but instead using a remote concept means that people do not really have to be responsible for what they do, that any negative action is excusable because it's really the system's fault anyway. When your working-class white husband beats you, he is your direct oppressor. Your body is not being mutilated by the "ruling class." The ruling class of course gives full approval and support to what your husband is doing, because among other reasons they are at home beating their wives, "girlfriends," mothers, sisters and daughters too. When the poor Black man on your block rapes you, he is your direct oppressor. You are not being raped by the "ruling class." The ruling class again approves of your rape because they are in every sense raping Black and white women too, but it is not the ruling class who is negating your freedom and brutalizing you at that moment. When your white employer mistreats you as you clean up her home, it is not the ruling class who is oppressing you, it's her. Of course the white man who pays you your inadequate wages, *i.e.,* her husband, may be a member of the ruling class, but it is more likely that he is an ordinary middle-income racist male who also mistreats his wife. Your own Black sister who stays at home with her children is not getting paid anything for doing the same kind of work you do, *i.e.,* housework.

White males are the group who most often have the opportunity to oppress everybody, but Black and other Third World men can oppress women too and do so quite effectively and cruelly. One thing that Black feminism does is to be quite specific about naming the oppressor/enemy. This is another way of saying that the personal is political, a reality that many people do not want to accept. It is much less threatening on a gut level to call the oppressor the "Ruling Class" and to ignore everything and everyone else who is making your life intolerable and unfree. Talking about the ruling class is in many ways a male

construct. For Third World working-class men it may be more nearly accurate to say that it is the ruling class who exploit and dominate their lives. For Third World women who do not experience the same reality or suffer the same oppression as men, this concept is incomplete and until this is acknowledged women will continue to be exploited. The man who beats you is a member of the ruling class in your own home.

Let me make clear that I am not saying that feminism will solve everything, that it is the only road to "salvation." Black feminism, if it is to provide sound analysis of Black women's situation, must incorporate an understanding of economic oppression and racism as well as of sexism and heterosexism. What I am saying is that a deeply serious analysis of sexual oppression cannot be left out of revolutionary politics, that to ignore the pervasive and killing results of sexism as a trivial concern of Black and other Third World women is naive and false. As women all of us know how our lives have been undermined and broken because we are women, whether we consciously acknowledge it or not. This is why those of us who are Black and feminists must be committed to struggle and to learn with each other so that we can better understand the nature of the triple oppression we face. Only when we begin to understand and to practice the politics that come out of this understanding will we have a hope of becoming truly free.

March 8, 1976

Author's Postscript:

I wanted to share with readers how I feel and have always felt about ". . . Will the Real Enemy Please Stand Up?" Saying what I've said and having it in print scares me. This is because the essay so specifically addresses in a critical way the reality of violence against Black women by Black men. This has been a deeply taboo subject judged politically "incorrect" in different historical eras and by people of many different political persuasions. Even with the murders of twelve Black women in my own community (Boston) in a four-month period this year, I still fear that what I've said here will be misunderstood and dismissed by those who most need to hear it. Yet, I stand by the accuracy and integrity of my analysis and have always felt that it belonged in a Black feminist publication. I wanted readers to know that writing this and having it published were difficult and challenging decisions for me.

WHERE WILL YOU BE?

Boots are being polished
Trumpeters clean their horns
Chains and locks forged
The crusade has begun.

Once again flags of Christ
are unfurled in the dawn
and cries of soul saviors
sing apocalyptic on air waves.

Citizens, good citizens all
parade into voting booths
and in self-righteous sanctity
X away our right to life.

I do not believe as some
that the vote is an end,
I fear even more
It is just a beginning.

So I must make assessment
Look to you and ask:
Where will you be
when they come?

They will not come
a mob rolling
through the streets,
but quickly and quietly
move into our homes
and remove the evil,

the queerness,
the faggotry,
the perverseness
from their midst.
They will not come
clothed in brown,
and swastikas, or
bearing chest heavy with
gleaming crosses.
The time and need
for ruses are over.
They will come
in business suits
to buy your homes
and bring bodies to
fill your jobs.
They will come in robes
to rehabilitate
and white coats
to subjugate
and where will you be
when they come?

Where will we *all* be
when they come?
And they will come-

they will come
because we are
defined as opposite-
perverse
and we are perverse.

Every time we watched
a queer hassled in the
streets and said nothing-
It was an act of perversion.

Everytime we lied about
the boyfriend or girlfriend
at coffee break-
It was an act of perversion.

Everytime we heard,
"I don't mind gays
but why must they
be blatant?" and said nothing-
It was an act of perversion.

Everytime we let a lesbian mother
lose her child and did not fill
the courtrooms-
It was an act of perversion.

Everytime we let straights
make out in our bars while
we couldn't touch because
of laws-
It was an act of perversion.

Everytime we put on the proper
clothes to go to a family
wedding and left our lovers
at home-
It was an act of perversion.

Everytime we heard
"Who I go to bed with
is my personal choice-
It's personal not political"
and said nothing-
It was an act of perversion.

Everytime we let straight relatives
bury our dead and push our
lovers away-
It was an act of perversion.

And they will come.
They will come for
the perverts

& it won't matter
if you're
    homosexual, not a faggot
    lesbian, not a dyke
    gay, not queer
It won't matter
if you
    own your business
    have a good job
    or are on S.S.I.
It won't matter
if you're
    Black
    Chicano
    Native American
    Asian
    or White

It won't matter
if you're from
    New York
    or Los Angeles
    Galveston
    or Sioux Falls
It won't matter
if you're
    Butch, or Fem
    Not into roles
    Monogamous
    Non Monogamous
It won't matter
If you're
    Catholic
    Baptist
    Atheist
    Jewish
    or M.C.C.

They will come
They will come
to the cities
and to the land
to your front rooms
and in *your* closets.

They will come for
the perverts
and where will
you be
When they come?

ANN ALLEN SHOCKLEY

THE BLACK LESBIAN IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: AN OVERVIEW

Until recently, there has been almost nothing written by or about the black lesbian in American literature—a void signifying that the black lesbian was a nonentity in imagination as well as reality. This unique black woman, analogous to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* was seen but not seen because of what the eyes did not wish to behold. In a pioneer article by Barbara Smith entitled "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," the author candidly lamented:

> Black women are still in the position of having to "imagine," discover and verify Black lesbian literature because so little has been written from an avowedly lesbian perspective.[1]

The ignoring and absence of black lesbians as a literary subject can be attributed to a number of causes. First, white female writers did not know enough about black lesbians to write about them. Secondly, the focus of white women's literature has been on their own volatile positions.

This, of course leaves only the black female writer knowledgeable or sensitive enough to the subject to cultivate and strengthen an undernourished literature. Why have there been so pitifully few black women writers to embrace the topic? The answers are manifold, undergirded by the black female writers who gave top priority to writing about what was seen as their strongest oppression—racism. The literature by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black women writers reflects the dominance of this priority.

No doubt, there have been in the contemporary past black female writers who attempted to write about lesbian themes. These, perhaps known only to a few friends and editors, were probably not published because the works came too soon in respect to marketing time. Publishers were not interested in books with lesbian themes, for a productive money-making market was inconceivable. The socio-political temper of the times had not given rise to the activism of the women's or gay rights movements of the sixties. In conjunction with this, some of the books

were simply not of publishing quality. Then, as now, these women who did not surface, women who might have had something to say, but did not put forth any effort to write, did not have the time, inclination, or ability, even if they had wanted to.

It is my belief that those black female writers who could have written well and perceptively enough to warrant publication chose instead to write about black women in a heterosexual milieu. The preference was motivated by the fear of being labeled a lesbian, even if in some cases they were not.

This threat of being identified as gay, queer, funny, or a bull-dagger in black linguistics is embedded deeply within the overall homophobic attitude of the black community, a phenomenon stemming from social, religious, and biological convictions. The enmity toward homosexuality has long been rampant in black life, and is flagrantly revealed in the words of Minister Addul-Baqui of the male-supremacist Black Muslim religious sect:

> The dressing of man for another man's sexual companionship and the dressing of a woman for another woman's sexual companionship is an evil, lowly, foul thought.[2]

This malevolence has been especially directed toward black lesbians. Blacks have made very few attempts to understand or educate themselves regarding black lesbians. This lack of comprehension has aided in fueling the flames of animosity and misinformation toward them. Just as whites were afraid of and hated blacks because they did not *know* them, so blacks have an inherent bias against lesbians for the same reason.

Stereotypical caricatures of black lesbians abound in the black community, serving to feed antipathies. Formerly, the visible lesbian was the popularly designated "mannish" woman who fitted the stock mold; less stereotypical lesbians were not recognizable, nor did they venture forth to be recognized.

In addition, creating a more obscuring fog was the fact that no conscious efforts were made by knowledgeable individuals who could have documented truths over myths to help others become cognizant of the black lesbian as a person and not a thing. For example, during an oral history interview with a southern, black female gynecologist conducted by this writer, the subject of black women as lesbians was raised. To this, the learned practitioner off-handedly remarked that

lesbianism was acquired from white women. (A new disease, perhaps?)

The stereotypical "facts" alias fallacies surrounding black lesbians are ludicrous. They are labelled as being "too ugly to get a man"; "women who have been disappointed in love and turned to women"; "man-haters"; and "man-women" physically.

Muhammad Ali, former world's champion, but still champion of male chauvinism, typified these misconceptions when queried by a female reporter for the *Amsterdam News* about the ERA and the equalizing of economic opportunities. Ali characteristically displayed his lack of enlightenment by replying: ". . . some professions shouldn't be open to women because they can't handle certain jobs, like construction work. Lesbians, maybe, but not women."[3] What is a lesbian if not a woman?

Providing added impetus to the black community's negative concept of homosexuality was the thrust of the sixties. This was the period when the black movement was flourishing, bringing with it the promotion of black male identity to offset the myth of the black matriarchy. Some black women advocated "walking ten steps behind the male," unwittingly encouraging a new master-subserviency at the expense of black womanhood. The shibboleth of the times was to enhance black manhood.

In view of this, naturally, the independent woman-identified-woman, the black lesbian was a threat. Not only was she a threat to the projection of black male macho, but a *sexual* threat too–the utmost danger to the black male's institutionally designated role as "king of the lovers."

Combining with the stereotypical concepts and black male power thrust of the sixties was the sexism exhibited by black females toward her black lesbian sisters. "Fags" to black women are cute, entertaining, safe, and above all, *tolerated.* Males are expected to venture sexually from the norm. They are *men*, aren't they, and "boys will be boys."

All of these phobias, hostilities and myths existing around the black lesbian cause a paralyzing *fear* of labels which has prevented black women writers from writing openly and honestly about lesbianism. Black women writers *live* in the black community and *need* the closeness of family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers to share in the commonality of ethnicity for surviving in a blatantly racist society. This is foremost, superseding the dire need for negating misconceptions and fallacies with voices of truth. For some, it is easier and wiser to live peaceably within the black community by writing about what is socially acceptable.

There is now a trickling of lesbian themes grazing the pages of fiction and non-fiction by and about black lesbians. Even heterosexual black female writers and non-woman-identified women are throwing in, for better or worse, an occasional major or minor lesbian character. Unfortunately, within these works exists an undercurrent of hostility, trepidation, subtlety, shadiness, and in some instances, ignorance culling forth homophobic stereotypes. (In some reviews of my novel I, too, have been accused of character stereotypes.)

Maya Angelou's reminiscences touching upon lesbians in her two autobiographies tend to substantiate black women's conventional views and ideas about lesbians. In her *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she tells how her introduction to lesbians was made through the enduring classic, *The Well of Loneliness.* Angelou wrote: "It allowed me to see a little of the mysterious world of the pervert."[4] *Pervert?* Her attitude toward the male homosexual is decidedly more flexible, excluding them from this category:

> Of course, I ruled out the jolly sissies who sometimes stayed at our house and cooked whopping eight-course dinners while the perspiration made paths down their made-up faces. Since everyone accepted them. . . .[5]

This is a clear example of female sexism pertaining to the double-standard. It is all right for men but not women.

After reading *The Well of Loneliness*, Angelou begins to question her own sexuality because of her deepening voice and unfeminine body. She reads more and more on the subject of lesbians in libraries and reasons:

> After a thorough self-examination, in the light of all I had read and heard about dykes and bull-daggers, I reasoned that I had none of the obvious traits—I didn't wear trousers, or have big shoulders or go in for sports, or walk like a man or even want to touch a woman.[6]

In the sequel, *Gather Together in My Name,* Angelou wrote disapprovingly of two lesbians, Johnnie Mae and Beatrice who ". . . were lesbians, which was sinful enough. . . ."[7] Nevertheless, she does not think it sinful to use them for her own monetary advantage by assisting them in an arrangement to entertain their male customers.

Another autobiography by a black woman which describes a lesbian encounter is that of the world renowned singer, Billie Holliday. Recounting the attentions of a rich, white girl:

> She came around night after night. She was crazy about my singing and used to wait for me to finish up. I wasn't blind. I hadn't been on Welfare Island for nothing. It wasn't long before I knew I had become a thing for this girl.[8]

For the girl's enamoredness, Billie offered her explication:

> It's a cinch to see how it all begins. These poor bitches grow up hating their mothers and having the hots for their fathers. And since being in love with our father is taboo, they grow up unable to get any kicks out of anything unless it's taboo too.[9]

One famous black female singer whose bi-sexuality is frankly revealed by her biographer is Bessie Smith. The episodes of this gutsy, blues singer's sexual affairs with women are frankly told in Chris Albertson's *Bessie* (New York: Stein and Day, 1974).

Over fifty years *after* the publication of the lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness,* two black novels have appeared with strictly lesbian themes by black female writers. The first, by this author, *Loving Her* (Bobbs-Merrill, Inc., 1974, paperback, Avon, 1978), and *Ruby* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976) authored by the West Indian writer, Rosa Guy.

Ruby is, to use the librarian's professional jargon, a young adult novel levelled for grades eight and up. It was selected as one of the ten best books of 1977 by the American Library Association's Young Adult Services Division. The editors of the *Bulletin of Interracial Books for Children* disagreed with the Young Adult Services evaluation of the book, contending:

> Ruby reinforces sexist stereotypes about heterosexual males, heterosexual females *and* lesbians by implying that *real* lesbians are "masculine" types like Daphne, while "feminine" types like Ruby are destined to "go straight."[10]

The everlasting conundrum of stereotypes leads this writer to pose the question: when do stereotypes begin and end? Stereotypes

are found in real life, and isn't fiction supposed to mirror the images of existence?

Rosa Guy's *Ruby* is a continuation of her novel *The Friends* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), and is based on the West Indian Cathy family that moved to Harlem. The protagonist, Ruby Cathy, is an eighteen-year-old girl whose mother has died and who is being reared along with her sister by an overprotective and hard-working domineering father. Lonely, she enters into a "more than ordinary friendship" with a pretty, sophisticated mannish high school classmate, Daphne Duprey. The word lesbian is never mentioned throughout the 218-page novel, but "lover" is. The omission causes this writer to wonder if "lesbian" is too obnoxious for young readers, or was there a timidity on the part of the author to categorize the relationship as lesbian?

At the conclusion, Daphne is accepted at Brandeis and announces to Ruby she is "going straight." After an attempted suicide, Ruby, with the help of her father, turns her attention back to an old boyfriend. The reader is left to feel that the whole story was merely an excursion into a Freudian adolescent-stage crush and "all's well that ends well," as both girls go off into the rainbow of heterosexuality. The author has skirted issues without actually disturbing straight waters.

Black lesbian figures seem to be appearing more now as minor characters in novels. Rita Mae Brown, a celebrated white lesbian author, portrays one in her novel, *In Her Day* (Plainfield, Vt.: Daughters, Inc., 1976). The inclusion was somewhat of a disaster since the bourgeois professor Adele, a Ph.D. in pre-Columbian art, would hardly have been recognizable as black despite her "little Africa" East 71st Street garden apartment and a white cockatoo named Lester Maddox. Adele talks white without an intentional or unintentional break into black English, which is commonly done by all blacks heedless of education at some time or another. Adele acts white, thinks white, and apparently has no substantial black friends. She could have just been another white character which, possibly, she should have been.

Gayl Jones, a young, black writer, always seems to toss a minor lesbian character or two into her novels. In the first, *Corregidora,* the principal character rebuffs a lesbian advance in bed by a young girl named Jeffy:

> I was drowsy, but I felt her hands on my
> breast. She was feeling all on me up around
> my breast. I shot awake and knocked her out

on the floor. . . . There was a smell of vomit
in the room, like when you suck your thumb.[11]

A lesbian advance is described as so despicable that it is associated with the "smell of vomit." Are unwanted male overtures thusly depicted?

Jones' second novel, *Eva's Man* (New York: Random House, 1976), has the protagonist, Eva, sharing a jail cell with a lesbian. While Eva ruminates over the events leading to her imprisonment for killing her man, the cellmate provides a background, singular Greek chorus litany of on-going seduction.

Within the short story genre, more stories are developing with black lesbian themes. In her third book, a collection of short stories, *White Rat* (New York: Random House, 1977), Gayl Jones has two stories with explicitly lesbian subjects. One, "The Women," is told from the viewpoint of a young, black girl whose divorced mother has a succession of women lovers. When the affairs terminate, the mother tells the daughter they are "a bitches whore." The women lovers are all nebulous characters who do not have any real substance, nor any emotional effect on either mother or daughter. They enter, stay, and leave like ghosts. At the end, the author makes it clear that the daughter, in spite of the mother's lesbian activities, is heterosexual when she prepares to have sex with a boyfriend in her mother's bed.

The second story, "Persona," is a shell-like sketch about a female professor at a predominantly white, all-girls' college who is interested in a black "freshman." The story is murky and extremely subtle, as if the author was afraid to touch it with a heavy pen. Perhaps these stories of Gayl Jones could or *should* have said more.

Pat Suncircle, a pseudonym for a young, lesbian writer, has published two short stories in *Christopher Street*. The story "A Day's Growth" (February, 1977) is told by a fifteen-year-old girl, Leslie, who is being reared by a religious aunt in the south. On a Saturday, she comes to grips with her sexuality through following in the shadows the lives of Miss Katheryn and Miss Renita, a lesbian couple whom she wants to emulate. The second story, "When the Time Came" (April, 1978), is somewhat uneven, centering around a young homosexual boy and his visiting city aunt, who at the end communicate with understanding.

S. Diane Bogus, a young California poet, published a short story, "A Measure by June" in the *GPN News* (February, 1978). The first person narrative has confessional overtones which follow the storyline

of Vy and her relationship with a high school-dropout boyfriend turned con man, June Johnson, to her college years. Concluding with a sexual hotel tryst, Vy informs June she "likes women." The irony of this is that if she did not have the nerve to tell June *before* her sexual act with him, how did she find the courage afterwards?

Short stories are rare occurrences for black lesbian writers, who appear to prefer expressing themselves in poetry rather than prose. Audre Lorde, an established and well-known poet, is the most notable of the muses, paving the way early through her excellent writing and black woman courage. Her poetry does not deal with exclusively lesbian themes, encompassing others of love, women, race, family, children and places. The book, *From a Land Where Other People Live* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1973), was nominated for the 1974 National Book Award. Audre's most recent publications are *Coal* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1976), *Between Ourselves* (Point Reyes, CA.: Eidolon Editions, 1976), and *The Black Unicorn* (New York: W.W. Norton, Inc., 1978).

Pat Parker, well-known particularly on the West Coast, is also an established poet. In her four books, *Child of Myself* (San Lorenzo, CA.: Shameless Hussy Press, 1971), *Pit Stop* (Oakland, CA.: The Women's Press Collective, 1973), *Womanslaughter and Other Poems* (Oakland, CA.: Diana Press, 1978), and *Movement in Black: The Collected Poetry of Pat Parker,* 1961-1978 (Oakland, CA.: Diana Press, 1978), she writes with a beautifully realistic driving force. Stephanie Byrd, author of *25 Years of Malcontent* (Boston: Good Gay Poets Press, 1976), is a promising newcomer in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Versatile S. Diane Bogus stands out best with her poetry which has been published in magazines and anthologies of which not all have lesbian subjects. Her volumes of poetry, *I'm Off to See the Goddam Wizard Alright* (Inglewood, CA.: S. Diane Bogus, 1976) and *Woman in the Moon* (Stamford, Conn.: Soap Box Publishing, 1977), are new entrants in the field. Julia Blackwoman has not yet published a volume of poetry, but is certainly an exciting Philadelphia writer to watch, as indicated by her poem, "Revolutionary Blues," published in *Dyke* magazine's Ethnic Lesbians issue (Fall, 1977).

Azalea: A Magazine by Third World Lesbians, published in New York, should become a showpiece and vehicle for new black lesbian writers as well as writers on feminist themes. The preview issue (volume 1, no. 1, winter, 1977/78) contains the works of such burgeoning young poets as Donna Allegra, Becky Birtha, Linda Brown, Robin Christian, a.s. Natwa, and editor Joan Gibbs.

There is a wide vacuum existing that must be filled in the area of articles and essays by and about black lesbians. A pioneer and prolific writer utilizing this category is lesbian/feminist Anita R. Cornwell of Philadelphia. The author has appeared throughout the years in the pages of *The Ladder* and other lesbian/feminist publications. Her "Open Letter to a Black Sister" (*The Ladder,* October/November, 1971) and "From a Soul Sister's Notebook" (*The Ladder,* June/July, 1972), were reprinted in *The Lavender Herring: Lesbian Essays from the Ladder,* ed. by Barbara Grier and Coletta Reid (Oakland, CA.: Diana Press, 1976), and are landmarks for black lesbian writing. Anita's barbed wit is evident throughout when striking out at black male/female relationships or sexism. Her latest, "The Black Lesbian in a Malevolent Society," deploring sexism and black male oppression, appeared in *Dyke* (Fall, 1977). Anita R. Cornwell, like Audre Lorde and S. Diane Bogus, has not confined herself mainly to lesbian themes, but has written on the subjects of racism and black women as women in a racist/sexist society. Short stories of hers have appeared in established black magazines.

Black lesbian writers are sporadically writing articles for feminist newspapers. Terri Clark, a black lesbian socialist feminist, is an example with her article "Houston: A Turning Point," which was published in *Off Our Backs* (March, 1978). The article reported on the Houston Women's Conference from a black feminist perspective. Lea Hopkins, Kansas City poet and writer, has written for the *Kansas City Star*. "Revelation" (*Kansas City Star,* July 24, 1977) pertained to her being gay. The article is a part of her self-published *I'm Not Crazy, Just Different* (Kansas City, n.d.).

It is a pity that so few black women, heterosexual or lesbian, have read or even heard of these writers, with the exception of Audre Lorde. Mainstream publications tend to shy away from their endeavors; therefore the works are usually published by lesbian/feminist publications and publishers, or are self-published.

Regretfully, rarely are any of these writers reviewed, if at all, in black periodicals or newspapers. Herein sexism shows its horns once more. Black books are primarily reviewed in black publications. Black male reviewers tend to scorn books with lesbian themes, citing them as "sick." A striking illustration is the review of my book by a young, black, male student poet who, obviously incensed by it, wrote: "This bullshit should not be encouraged."[12]

The black female heterosexual reviewers who *could* be sensitive

to these works are usually too afraid of their peers to give them any kind of positive review; they are frightened of being tagged a closet lesbian, or a traitor to the black male. As a result, the black female heterosexual reviewer, excluding Alice Walker, either joins the males with all-around negative reviews or elects not to review the work at all.

With established publishers now more openly amenable to lesbian themes, prompted, I fear, more by money than altruism, hopefully a richer and larger body of literature by and about black lesbians will appear through the writings of new as well as established black female writers. There exists an impending need for the planting of additional seeds in what Barbara Smith has termed "a vast wilderness of works. . . ."[13] Surely there are those who can help break through and cause this literature to blossom; it is desperately needed to present another side of the lives of black women.

NOTES

[1] Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *Conditions: Two* (October, 1977), 39.

[2] *Brooklyn Amsterdam News,* 14 January, 1978, p. B1.

[3] Cassandra Taylor, "Is Muhammad a Male Chauvinist?" *New York Amsterdam News* (14 January, 1978), p. C2.

[4] Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 265.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 272.

[7] Maya Angelou, *Gather Together in My Name* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 54.

[8] Billie Holliday and William Duffy, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York: Lancer Books, 1972), p. 86.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 87.

[10] Editors, rev. of *Ruby,* by Rosa Guy, *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin,* 8 (1977), 15.

[11] Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 39.

[12] Frank Lamont Phillips, rev. of *Loving Her,* by Ann Allen Shockley, *Black World,* XXIV (September, 1975), p. 90.

[13] Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," p. 41.

song lyrics

BEHOLD, THE WOMYN *song lyrics*

Sandy's blue and gold, ya see
So many womyn to behold
Ellen's orange and luster brown
Mercedes wears a whisper crown
And it's a sense of laughter
we all share
That takes away a bit a the pain

Marie takes her tea at midday
Helen's got a bran' new son
But Stephy, no she don't like men much
She gonna go out and buy a gun
yeah . . . well?
They're your friends and my friends too
What is that you say you're gonna do?

Eliza spends each weekend by the sea
Jennie works inside the cannery
Sarah provides a womyn's space
Diane and she cook food for the
place and
all the walls are painted red and green
but where they gonna get money for
the rent that's due this week

Nomi loves her royal blue hats
Jesse cries a thousand tears
Cheryl's got about 20 cats and kittens
Surrounding her while she holds
"Jesse, don't cry now babe, I'm here
Let me ease your pain of the years."

And Sandy's blue and gold ya see
So many womyn to behold
Ellen's orange and luster brown
Mercedes wears a whisper crown
and it's a sense of laughter we
all gotta share that takes away
the bite of the pain.

I'M A WOMON *song lyrics*

Pantyhose, lipstick and
fancy dress shoes
I don't wear these things
just give me a good pair of
boots and jeans
But the newspaperstand man
he said, "Sonny, that'll be a dollar."
And I swear, I nearly grabbed him by
his collar, sayin
Don't you ever, don't you dare
don't you ever, don't you dare now
don't you ever, don't you dare
I'm a womon

Walkin down the street—crowds
of people, they pass and meet
and there are many many . . . men
Well, they look you up, they look
you down oh they look you round
and round but they never really see
your eyes
Oh they just whistle and call you names
hey did you know that you're a girl
a chick a pussy yeah
a cunt a foxy lady . . . NO!
Don't you ever, don't you dare
I'm a womon.

Walkin down-a-this old bridge
hey and what a fine night this is
Well there's a cold wind
Blowin off the Charles river
And there's a wild mountain
yearnin in my heart
every now and then a bus a car
a truck passes by me and then
all is still, so still and quiet again.
Walkin across the Mass. Ave. Bridge
take a look over the edge into
the deep dark awaters awaters awaters
O can ya' feel the wind blowin cold
Off the Charles River
The night sky was so clear
I thought there was no one near
and it was two a.m. when I hear
Learin, Jeering
"Hey nigger, where you goin?"
and I turn to find three guys slowin
down in a car on the road
Now you know a womon
shouldn't be out at night
but why must I hide in fear
No, Don't you ever
Don't you dare, I'm a womon.

THE YALLER GAL *song lyrics*

I was born in 1829
Late in the afternoon
The last red leaves was on the trees
They was having a full moon
The Grannies in the cabins
Kept a watchful eye on me
And told me tales of how someday
The Truth would set us free

My Daddy's ways were fancy
He called me the Yaller Gal
I knew I'd best do what he told
Or be whipped until I swelled.
I was only just about half growed
When a sister was born to me
With Father's skin and Momma's hair
She's a Yaller Gal like me

When Moses came a singing
My Momma heard the call
We stole away and joined the train
Our flight was freedom's law
We marched till we were bloody
And left the ones who fell
But Momma said up North and free
We wouldn't birth no Yaller Gals.

She loved us both a plenty
But if she could have gotten away
She'd a killed our master on the spot
When he came to have his way
My Father gave us whippings
But Momma made us free
Our Daddy is her Daddy too
She's a Yaller Gal like me. . .

SONG OF A SISTER'S FREEDOM *song lyrics*

Have you seen her come by heah?
She is tall with woolly hair
She has scars along her hands
She's been branded.

She is one of the ones who survived.
They say the devil's on her side–
They say Thalassa's her name.
They couldn't tame her.

Well she grew big, bad, and bold
And she wouldn't trade her body
Or the dignity of her soul
For their freedom or their luxuries.
If I hadn't helped my sister
They'd have put those chains on me!

Drunk, they went ripping through the camp–
Papa's boys with one intent
Slavery ended five years ago
But they ignored it.

They tried to take her on the ground–
The white men tried to take her down.
They said "You women were made to serve,
And you a sinnah!"
But she grew big, bad, and bold
And she wouldn't trade her body
Or the dignity of her soul
For their freedom or their luxuries.
If I hadn't helped my sister
They'd have put those chains on me!

They tied her body to a tree
And left her bleeding until we
Cut her down and took her home
As a daughter.

Only women know this place.
We are leather and we are lace.
We will never be downed again—
We are strong now.
'Cause we've grown big, bad, and bold.
And we won't trade our bodies
Or the unity of our souls
For your freedom or your luxuries
If I hadn't helped my sister
They'd have put those chains on me!

Have you seen her come by heah?
She is tall with woolly hair
She has scars along her hands
She's been branded.
She is one of the ones who survived
They say the devil's on her side
They say Thalassa's her name.
They couldn't tame her
They couldn't tame her!

BILLY DE LYE *song lyrics*

Billy de Lye was a reckless gambler
And used to getting what he went after.
He talked so sweet like he knew he should
And I never had quite understood
Why a woman never stayed long
By the side of this fine young man
But I soon learned why.

CHORUS

> And oh, judge, your honor
> No I did not want to shoot that boy
> But he would not listen to me
> And can't you see
> I could not take him on me anymore.

Billy I loved you but I have to leave you
You know I've tried but I just refuse to
Put up with all your sad abuses
The lies, the anger, and misuses.
And I thought he took it like a man
But late that night outside
My front door he did stand.

I know this is a lot to take
But I was not seduced, sir, I was raped.
I think it is a gross deception
To blame it on my misperception
For once a woman gives in she's damned
But does that mean we must
Put out on command.

I opened the door and from the way he wheeled me
I knew Billy de Lye surely planned to kill me
He grabbed my arm as he pulled me down

And pinned me struggling to the ground
But as he fumbled with his pants
He dropped his gun and I grabbed
For my last chance.

COME ON HOME *song lyrics*

I'm gonna go down
and tell my sisters
that it's time to come on home
women together
look to each other
we got work to do

Come on
let's talk about it
oh we need to sit down and get acquainted
it's been a long time
I been wantin' to know ya
to reach out and touch
reach out and touch

CHORUS

Come on
let's join together
we need the power of unity
Come on
let's get acquainted
no more anonymity

We've been divided
and polarized
within our own family
manipulation
cloaked in reason
and a whole lot of talk of good will

There's a sword that heals
and I believe our time has come
it's been a long time
we've been separated
sister woman come home

I want to hold you
I just want to hold you
and let you feel the strength of my love
it's been a long time
we've been separated
sister woman come on home
come on home
come on home.

reviews

NAPPY EDGES by Ntozake Shange.
St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010. 1978.
148 pages.

Ntozake Shange emerged as a public black literary voice in 1976 with the New York Public Theatre's production of her choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf.* Though the poet's perceptions of the Afro-American woman were theatrically provocative, her insights were not unique or even uniquely stated—just colorful and sassy. And she herself never claimed they were unique; but the *New York Times,* et al. tried to impose it on our consciousnesses as the definitive statement on black womanhood. *for colored girls . . .* gives us no visions of triumphant black womanhood, but rather casts black women in the same old victim-woman-sitting-around-pining-over-some-dude-that-done-me-wrong mold. The pathos is contrivedly resolved in the pronouncement by the lady in red: "i found god in myself & i loved her/i loved her fiercely."[1] The work can be construed as a tribute to the black woman's survival, but survival is not triumph. Our writers should not only give us images of who we are but also visions of who we can be.

Shange's latest work, *nappy edges:* "the roots of your hair/what turns back when we sweat, run, make love, dance, get afraid, get happy: the tell-tale sign of living," is rendered with the same wit and inventiveness as is *for colored girls . . . .* The language is metaphorical and allusive; it approximates the improvisational quality of Afro-American music forms; and the diction attempts to replicate Afro-American parlance and vernacular, or rather the essays and poems are talked in the way some black folk may talk when we are among ourselves and there are no white folk around to make us self-conscious.

The first section of the work, "things i would say," includes an essay, a short story, and self-interview. Both the essay and self-interview—

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[1] Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 1976), p. 64.

"takin a solo/a poetic possibility/a poetic imperative" and "i talk to myself," respectively are replete with references to Third World writers, poets, and musicians, who have been Shange's muses and to whom she claims allegiance. The pieces plead for recognition of our (black) writers as we have recognized our singers and musicians; for empathy with the writers' creative struggles; and for a fusion of the two forms in our consciousnesses.

She cites verses of poets communicating their guts to the world, and claims the world sits taciturnly and interprets their works as cosmic statements. The world does not consider the poet's personal struggle to communicate her/his (mostly his) "moment."

> we assume a musical solo is a personal statement/
> we think the poet is speaking for the world. there's
> something wrong there, a writer's first commitment
> is to the piece, itself. how the words fall & leap . . . .
>
> (p. 10)

I suppose I agree that writers are committed to the struggle to communicate their existential moments, but I do not agree that all writers are only "dealin with language/not politics" (p. 10). Sometimes the politics and the "moment" are synonymous. Language—however we adapt it or adapt to it—is eternally political, because language reveals to what degree the writer accepts or rejects the prevailing culture. And, of course, the personal is political for the same reason language is.

"i talk to myself" is a biography of Shange's creative heritage and process. It is a cute, name-dropping, puerile piece not unlike "takin a solo. . . ." However, we do learn how Shange reconciles her appreciation of male writers with her feminist reputation:

> some men are poets. they find wonderment and
> joy in themselves and give it to me. i snatch it up
> and gloat. . . . some men are just men who simply
> are not worth the time it takes to forget a bad
> idea. i stay far from them: i hear there is an epi-
> demic of vacuity whenever they open their mouths.
>
> (pp. 20-21)

Some of those men who "are just men" are writers like Imamu Baraka and Ishmael Reed—from whom she claims, in the same piece, to have taken creative sustenance—and they are still trapped in the vacuity of European maleness, misogyny, and heterosexism, despite their technical skill and contributions to black (male) letters.

As she expounds further, we do discover that her feminism, like most women's, is rooted in the experience of being and working with women "to ferret out what i know and touch in a woman's body" (p. 21).

"wow. . . yr just like a man" is a pseudo short story of a woman poet who gains the chauvinistic acceptance of her male poet peers, because she does not conform to their stereotypic perceptions of women. Hence, "wow . . . yr just like a man," one of the boys, etc. This piece is a theatrical and essentially hackneyed rendering of a woman's realization of her vulnerability to emotional and creative exploitation by men, even those who grant her legitimacy. The language is tacky-precious, but the circularity of some of the passages is reminiscent of Gertrude Stein's prose, a female influence she neglects to mention.

The major portion of the work is poetry, divided into four sections: "love & other highways," "closets," "& she bleeds," and "whispers with the unicorn."

The love poems in "love & other highways" are grand conceits of (black) male sex energy, erect with the usual invocation of her male muses—e.g., Albert Ayler, Pablo Neruda, Stevie Wonder (the best of the lot). Among her rehashes of all those late sixties' "New Black Poetry" glorifications of black (heterosexual) love is one down-to-earth piece—"this woman thinks we're de beauvoir and jean paul/never forget i'm a spic and yr a colored girl." Unlike the other poems which posit the female personae prone and willing, this one attempts to set the two lovers on equal footing. The poet rejects those mighty metaphors which compare kisses to the surge of the Mississippi and Amazon rivers and memories of love-making to the prominence of great monuments and other European tourist attractions, e.g., the Arc de Triomphe and Mont Saint Michel. Instead she makes myth out of the immediate past—a technique she attributes to David Henderson (p. 23) in "i talk to myself"—with allusions to Mamie Smith and Bessie Smith, classic blues singers of the 1920's. Yet, the traditional symbol of tragedy the singers convey is defied in the female persona's statement:

> I dont expect to be left in the loneliest/of beds/wit
> mamie & bessie to comfort me.

The next section, "closets"—not a lesbian testament—reveals a troubled, reflective, harsh and probing voice. The poetry is many times breath-taking. The stock allusions appear, but less frequently. There is more direct statement, less reduction to metaphor. Shange leaves the

struggle for personal intimacy, implicit in "love & other highways," to embrace the grotesqueries of life and living in the external world. She exchanges the romanticism of "where the mississippi meets the amazon" for the bluntness of "who am i thinkin of," a poem dedicated to a woman:

> when i write i think of my friends/the people of my visions
> but how cd i presume to think of men/who leave so little behind

She takes off her nose rings—at one time symbols of identification with our non-Western heritage—and marches "unadorned" to witness the diseased and rotting realities strewn in the streets of the West (New York City, Paris):

> i frequent corners where men/beat each other to death
> in the name of/love
>
> ("i had five nose rings")

"telephones & other false gods" expresses outright hatred of the world of "male manufacture,"* the profane world of policemen who molest children and "make it in" their wives asses after they "kick a niggah's balls" and dream of "raspberry toast'ems." The images are brutal; and the poet calls out to all of us who have no dimes for telephone calls and cannot find each other in city directories to "stay by someone," to make a connection.

The third section, "& she bleeds," is much the same universe imaged in "closets." Yet these poems deal more specifically with women's pain, vulnerability, and culpability: the pain of growing up black and female ("resurrection of the daughter"), the vulnerability to violence ("with no immediate cause"), and the white woman's culpability in the destruction of black men ("the suspect is black & in his early 20's").

"with no immediate cause" is one of the most eloquent poems I have read on the savagery of violence against women, with the awesome statistical refrain of "every three minutes . . ., every five minutes. . ., every ten minutes. . . ," and the persona's awareness that the old man she sits next to on the subway and the young man who serves her coffee may have done or will do violence to women. She screams that, because of those statistics and because of the potential of all men to rape, batter, and murder women, all women have "immediate cause"—immediate cause to defend ourselves just as violently.

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*T.S. Eliot

"the suspect is black & in his early 20's" is a bombastic diatribe using Richard Wright's character, Mary Dalton (*Native Son*), the white woman Bigger Thomas murders accidentally while trying to sublimate his sexual frenzy, as the symbol of the white woman's culpability in the destruction of black men. Patricia Hearst is accused of being the latter day Mary Dalton and being "the bringin of death to our sons." Neither the fictional Mary Dalton nor the confused Patricia Hearst are causes of the black man's destruction. We all know who causes the destruction of all of us who are not white, not male, not heterosexual, and not rich.

The last section, "whispers with the unicorn," scintillates with poems about music, dance, musicians, poets, friends, wild and crazy niggers. The last poem, "an invitation to my friends," which concludes the work, is an urgent and upbeat heralding to us to be where music is, to find ourselves through it, in it, and to let it make us be who we are. The poet feminizes music:

> i know where music expects me/& when she finds me
> i am bathed in the ocean's breath
> & the soft glory of my laughter.

Ntozake Shange is definitely a poet holding her space to be, as she tells us—sometimes protesting too much. The poetry of *nappy edges* is telling evidence of the poet's growth beyond *for colored girls. . . .* The poems are vibrant, visceral, sometimes brilliant, rarely frivolous, occasionally self-indulgent, abundantly magnanimous. So many I did not tell about: "cross oceans into my heart," "serious lessons learned," "for all my dead & loved ones," "an ol fashion lady," "the old men," "frank albert & viola benzena owens."

She runs up the mountain to catch the rainfall in her hands; and runs, trips, sometimes falls back down, but nonetheless she brings us back the surprising and unpredictable gift of her imagination. While her sexual sensibility still seems adamantly hetero-erotic, her sensual sensibility is woman-centered, and her creative consciousness is unabashedly Afro-American.

> my visions are my own
> my truth no less violent than necessary
> to make
> my daughters
> dreams as real as menses.
>
> ("& she bleeds")

I trust Shange's nappy edges will get nappier as she continues to struggle for vision. And I, like the poet, hope that when we emerge victorious, we *will* have "some of that rock 'n' roll/for de new land" ("lotsa body & cultural heritage").

LINDA C. POWELL

BLACK MACHO AND THE MYTH OF THE SUPERWOMAN by Michele Wallace. Dial Press, 1979, 177 pp., $7.95.

Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* never recovers from our expectations of it. No single volume could withstand the hype and controversy that has surrounded this one. This particular book, however, which doesn't say enough about anything, certainly can't.

"Black Macho" and "The Myth of the Superwoman" are two separate essays which examine specific ideas about black women, black men and their relationships. Wallace's work proceeds from the premise that:

> . . . there is a profound distrust, if not hatred, between black men and black women that has been nursed along largely by white racism but also by an almost deliberate ignorance on the part of blacks about the sexual politics of their experience in this country.

"Black Macho" traces the development of patterns of interaction between black men and women from slavery through the present. Wallace contrasts "patriarchal macho"—as exemplified by the family and community-rooted Malcolm X, against "Narcissistic Macho"—the Man of the Black Power Movement who sought only his "manhood."

"The Myth of the Superwoman" attacks certain contradictory beliefs about the black woman and her needs. Wallace uses historic examples of black women involved in their communities to show how the strong, invulnerable "superwoman" image has presented a real assessment of the status of black women. She pays special attention to the resistance of some black women to the Women's Movement and calls upon the black woman to develop an analysis and assert an identity.

In the process, we learn a great deal about Michele Wallace, the woman. She was born in 1952 and grew up on Sugar Hill, Harlem, New York City. Her mother was an artist and teacher and Wallace describes herself as middle-class. She attended New Lincoln, an integrated private school "located on the very boundary of the ghetto," where she mingled

with "a hodgepodge of performers', intellectuals', and ordinary capitalists' children." A serious case of eczema which lasted through her early adolescence negatively affected her self-image. When the Civil Rights Movement shifted gears into the Black Power Movement, Wallace was 16 years old and:

> . . . blackness came to Harlem. In lofts, theatres, apartments, the streets, any available space—black artists, musicians, writers, poets, many of them fresh from the East Village, began to gather in response to the cries of "Black Power" and "kill whitey" that had echoed in the streets during the recent riots. They were the cultural wing come to entertain, to guide, to stimulate the troops of black rebels.

During this period, for somewhat obscure reasons, Wallace's mother chose to place her in a Catholic shelter for runaway girls.

> . . . since it was obvious that her attempt to protect me was going to prove a failure, she was determined to make me realize that as a black girl in white America I was going to find it an uphill climb to keep myself together. I did not have a solid and powerful middle-class establishment to rebel against—only an establishment of poverty and oppression thinly veiled by a few trips to Europe, a private school education, and some clothes from Bonwit Teller. She wanted to compel me to think for myself because she knew, whatever else she didn't know, that I would never be able to survive if I didn't.

This five-week stay proved crucial for Wallace, and she says:

> In the girls I met at the Residence I could see generation after generation stretched out into infinity of hungry, brutalized, illiterate children. Born of children. Black women have never listened to their mothers. No black woman ever pays much attention to any other black woman. And so each one starts out fresh, as if no black woman had ever tried to live before. The Black Movement was unable to provide me with the language I needed to discuss these matters, I had no alternative but to become a feminist.

And this declaration is the book's foremost problem. Feminism is a political ideology, an analysis of the role of sexism in human society

and a plan for change. It is a formed, viable entity, backed by an international movement of women. Choosing to feature this label throughout the book bought Wallace some of the support and validation of that movement, as well as some measure of notoriety as the *"black* feminist." At the same time, she created expectations, of clarity, vision and judgment, that she simply doesn't meet.

The reader is especially confused by Wallace's view of the 60's. Her analysis of that era is characterized by a focus on the psychosexual dynamics of the time and a general romanticism about how societal change happens.

> To most of us Black Power meant wooly heads, big black fists and stern black faces, gargantuan omnipotent black male organs, big black rifles and foot-long combat boots, tight pants over young muscular asses, dashikis, and broad brown chests; black men looting and rioting in the streets, taking over the country by brute force, arrogant lawlessness and an unquestionable sexual authority granted them as the victims of four hundred years of racism and abuse.

This kind of assertion is comparable to the Second Wave of the Women's Movement being evaluated exclusively on the bras allegedly burned at a beauty pageant in the early seventies.

Historically, the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements were transforming for all kinds of people—black, white, male and female. These movements were the political training ground for thousands who would later be active in anti-war, anti-nuclear, women's and continuing black community organizing. It was a time of open resistance and defiance, when many of us tested the limits set by our oppression to see how far they would give. It's hard to reconcile that reality with Wallace's perceptions:

> There was more to the protest and furor of the sixties and seventies than an attempt to correct the concrete problems of black people. The real key was the carrot the white man had held just beyond the black man's nose for many generations, that imaginary resolution of all the black man's woes and discontent, something called manhood. *It was the pursuit of manhood* that stirred the collective imagination of the masses of blacks in this country and led them to almost turn America upside down. [Italics mine]

> And when the black man went as far as the adoration of his own genitals could carry him, his revolution stopped. A big Afro, a rifle, and a penis in good working order were not enough to lick the white man's world after all.

Her ideas are provocative, but Wallace is simply too willing to rewrite history to fit her own theories.

Unnecessarily, Wallace fans the flames of one of the oldest and most persistent myths among black women: the nature of interracial relationships between black men and white women. Wallace never states flat-out that these relationships are undesirable, she simply snipes at them throughout the book:

> That same fall the streets of New York witnessed the grand coming out of black male/white female couples. Frankly, I found this confusing. I was enough of a slave to white liberal fashions to believe that two people who wanted each other had a right to each other, but was that what this was about?
>
> It was the Civil Rights Movement, however, that also made it clear that a gap was developing between black men and women. Although usually grudgingly respected by men for the contribution they made to the movement's work, black women were never allowed to rise to the lofty heights of a Martin Luther King or a Roy Wilkins or even a John Lewis. . . . And there was yet another price the black women of the Civil Rights Movement had to pay for their competence. After hours, their men went off with white women.

Rooted in this belief that somehow men and women "belong" to each other, Wallace misses a key opportunity to restate this "dilemma" in *feminist* terms. She says:

> That young, educated, upwardly mobile, politically active and aware black men were taking an interest in white women had nothing to do with whether black women or white women were more docile, compliant, or attractive. . . . There was a misunderstanding between the black man and the black woman, a misunderstanding as old as slavery, the I.O.U. was finally being called in. . . . The result was a brain-shattering explosion upon the heads of black women, the accumulation of over three hundred years of rage.

A feminist analysis of this phenomenon starts from simpler notions. The political reality is that black women are often trapped by our conditioning as women—passive, "lady-like," male-identified, and dependent. We are to be "chosen." Black men, like white men, share a special kind of freedom with regard to women. Men, as a class, have the power to "choose" women that is related to our status as reactive, not proactive, partners. (Incidentally, Wallace is much better at drawing connections between black and white women than black and white men.) Anger toward black women and blaming white women are ways to fend off the feelings of rejection, powerlessness and vulnerability that always accompany the traditional female role. In a larger sense, these relationships have significance only as long as we accept our own powerlessness and believe ourselves "unfinished" without a man.

Wallace stumbles most disappointingly on issues that have been crucial to the Women's Movement. She appears totally uncritical of the nuclear family as an institution, and is most revealing in her comments about single black women who choose to become parents. She attributes this trend to the fact that:

> . . . a black woman has no legitimate way of coming together with other black women, no means of self-affirmation—in other words, no women's movement, and therefore no collective ideology. Career and success are still the social and emotional disadvantages to her that they were to white women in the fifties. There is little in the black community to reinforce a young black woman who does not have a man or a child and who wishes to pursue a career. She is still considered against nature. It is extremely difficult to assert oneself when there remains some question of one's basic identity.

These are important ideas worthy of discussion, but Wallace is exclusively expressing male-identified perspectives on them. From a woman's vantage point, there are many other reasons why a black woman without a husband might choose to be a mother: love of children, faith in the future of the black community, desire for the physical experience of pregnancy, lack of interest in relationships with men, etc. A feminist perspective affirms all of these possible choices.

Any questions about Wallace's familiarity with the more serious issues within radical feminist thought are answered by her one devastatingly bitter comment on lesbians:

> Some black women have come together because they can't find husbands. Some are angry with their boyfriends. The lesbians are looking for a public forum for their sexual preference.

The basic connections between sexual preference, sex roles, and sexism are well-understood by most feminists. Wallace is obviously unfamiliar with them.

The overall tone of the book is particularly difficult to understand. We are never clear whether Wallace considers herself a part of the community she's describing. In a misplaced effort to be witty and bright, she is often condescending and coy.

A prime example is her treatment of Angela Davis as "the best known female activist in the Black Power Movement."

> . . . Angela Davis became a prime mover in the committee to free the Soledad Brothers. She subsequently became friendly with George Jackson's brother Jonathan, who was seventeen, and began to correspond with George Jackson. Although she had only seen him briefly in his courtroom appearance, she fell in love with him. *Such things were not uncommon in the sixties.*
>
> On August 7, 1970, Jonathan Jackson attended the trial of James McClain, a prisoner at San Quentin who was a friend of George's. At an early point during the proceedings young Jackson stood up. He had a carbine in his hand and, as in all the good movies, he ordered everyone in the courtroom to freeze. McClain, as well as Ruchell Magee and William Christmas, also prisoners at San Quentin who were present in order to testify, joined Jonathan. They left the courtroom with Judge Harold Haley, Assistant DA Gary Thomas, and several jurors, and got into a waiting van. A San Quentin guard fired on them, and a general shoot out followed, leaving three of the prisoners and Judge Haley dead, Thomas, Magee and one of the jurors wounded. *It was called a revolt. . . .* Angela Davis, a brilliant, middle-class black woman, with a European education, a Ph.D. in philosophy, and a university appointment, was willing to die for a poor, uneducated black male inmate. *It was straight out of Hollywood–Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart.* [Italics mine]

The issue raised by Wallace–whether the politics of Davis' work

were as relevant as her position in "support" of black men–is important. But her manner of raising these issues somewhat diminishes our respect for her. And her characterization of Davis as "a person driven by a sense of mission–totally committed to alleviating some of the pain inflicted upon people in this world," is inconsistent with her real life as a political woman, committed to the overthrow of an inhumane social system. Her motivation is *not* charity, but justice.

This is a difficult book to review. It is not a political work; it does not confront or question basic power relations (and before I accepted that fact, this review was going to be considerably longer). This is not a formal scholarly study; there are no footnotes, few sources cited and Wallace chose not to use the interviews she had conducted. It is not simply a personal memoir; Wallace clearly goes far beyond individual experience to sweeping social commentary. This book is an ineffective mix of all of these forms; inflammatory, and suggestive without actually challenging anyone or anything. In many ways, it is a book of the 70's–ahistorical, apolitical and me-centered. It accepts–without question–too many assumptions that ensnare too many people.

We still need the book that this could have been. A feminist analysis of the relationships between black men, women, and children, is desperately needed. However, this book could have been helped immeasurably had Wallace absorbed some radical feminist theory in addition to Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, and James Baldwin, whom she relies upon heavily. Or if she had spoken with some black feminist activists and theoreticians (who, contrary to Wallace's lack of knowledge, *do* exist).

Still, this book should be read. Traditional, male-identified, upwardly mobile black women and men may gain interesting insights into their relationships and self-images. People committed to systematic social change need to critique this book in terms of *why* it was published at *this* time and with *such* attention.

Like the controversy in the media three years ago around Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf,* the response to this book shows how much the black community wants to talk about sexual politics. So much so, in fact, that in many places, people aren't talking about this book at all. They're discussing the real issues of concern to black men and women–sex roles, relationships, parenting, sexuality, building a brighter future for all of us, etc.

Unfortunately, this is the only book that many black people will

read in hopes of learning more about feminism as an ideology. It is important that black feminists everywhere use this opportunity to focus on the real political issues and the importance of systemic change for *all* people. The difficult task of talking to the entire black community about feminism as a strategy for change must continue and grow. To the extent that *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* fuels and encourages that dialogue, reading it is important.

THE BLACK UNICORN by Audre Lorde.
W.W. Norton, New York. 1978. 122 pp. $9.95 cloth, $3.95 paper.

A Critic advises
not to write on controversial subjects
like freedom or murder,
but to treat universal themes
and timeless symbols
like the white unicorn.

a *white* unicorn?

Dudley Randall

In *The Black Unicorn,* Audre Lorde constructs a new cosmology and mythology rooted in the pantheon of the Dahomey, Yoruba and other West Afrikan deities.* Lorde posits the black unicorn–more than sign and symbol–a totem, appropriate to her contemporary black lesbian feminism. For the black unicorn can only be tamed by a blakwoman–warrior woman, daughter of the female divinity.

The black unicorn is greedy.
The black unicorn is impatient.
The black unicorn was mistaken
for a shadow
or symbol
and taken
through a cold country
where mist painted mockeries
of my fury.
It is not on her lap where the horn rests
but deep in her moonpit
growing.

*The use of the K in the spelling of Afrika and Afrikan is deliberate–my shorthand way of identifying myself as pan-Afrikanist, Nationalist. The spelling of blakwoman is my attempt to distinguish my identity from a color. Also, I believe that C can be eliminated from the alphabet except in combinations.

The black unicorn is restless
the black unicorn is unrelenting
the black unicorn is not
free. ("The Black Unicorn," 3)

Greedy, impatient, restless, unrelenting, not free. The Heiresses of Mawulisa and Yemanja are not free—hence greedy, impatient, restless and unrelenting in their struggle. The roots are Afrikan but the flowering is in the USA.

The language of Audre Lorde is lyrical—singing of the essentials of living and loving—ironic, angry, sometimes bitter, often passionate. Lorde's poetic imagery provides convincing support for the critical theory which posits the existence of black female language and diction. For her poems are filled with images of water: rain, rivers, tears, drownings, moistness, mud, of life and death, of growing things, of blood, of darkness juxtaposed with light—particularly moonlight. And the women are always present. Specific women: grandmothers, mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, lovers, deities, warrior women, crafts women/poets, market women. She weaves a cloth, elaborate as *kente,* as these words and images re-appear in differing poetic contexts like different colored threads creating a pattern that identifies the weaver.

The addition of the Afrikan symbols, from the creator-deity Seboulisa through the mother river deity Yemanja to the male-female deity Mawulisa, to her poetic language forces the reader into another frame of reference where divine, creative power is not necessarily male. All things are possible for blakwomen. Afrikan heritage includes warrior women (Amazons) and queens/chiefs. The descendants of Afrikan deities, warrior women, chiefs must be ready to fight and to lead. The past informs the present and the connections between ancient and contemporary Dahomey and Yoruba deities to the present struggles of blakwomen, the deaths of blakwomen, children and men are woven into the cloth.

Lorde's poems speak of black girlhoods—girls becoming women under pressures as horrible as incest or through gradual questing. The poems speak of blakwomen loving—not only children, or men, but other women. Lorde's love poetry is by turn tender, witty, biting, erotic. And she reminds us that friendship is love, too. All relationships are "Journey Stones." Another characteristic of these poems and other blakwomen's poems is their specificity. They name names (in the Afrikan tradition) of women, men and children—Yemanja, Harriet, Assata, Alvin Frost, Martha, Margaret, and Jan appear in the

titles. Other names are found in the texts. The effect of this naming is to draw us into the poet's world.

The book is divided into four sections, and there is a definite progression. Part one establishes the cosmology or frame of reference—an Afrikan warp for the weft from the USA to be woven through.

> I am
> woman
> and not white
>
> ("A Woman Speaks," p. 4)

It is a woman-centered, "matriarchical" consciousness that we find in this section, one that pays obeisance to female deities (cf. "125th Street and Abomey"). Having summoned ancestral spirits, Lorde moves into NOW and HERE, picking threads for her weft from people, situations and problems in the USA. A child is shot by a policeman. An artist struggles to create. A man dies. A girl child struggles to become woman. A writer ponders her mission. "A Litany for Survival" celebrates the contemporary achievement of her people, particularly her sisters: "we were never meant to survive." But we have. And this cloth is complete. The book closes with the ritual incantation of "Solstice":

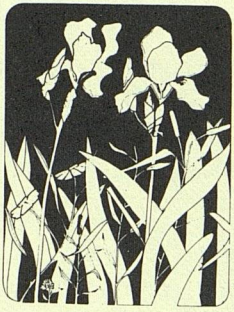
> My skin is tightening
> soon I shall shed it
> like a monitor lizard
> like remembered comfort
> at the new moon's rising
> I will eat the last signs of my weakness
> remove the scars of old childhood wars
> and dare to enter the forest whistling
> like a snake that has fed the chameleon
> for changes
> I shall be forever.
>
> May I never remember reasons
> for my spirit's safety
> may I never forget
> the warnings of my woman's flesh
> weeping at the new moon
> may I never lose
> that terror
> that keeps me brave
> May I owe nothing
> that I cannot repay.
>
> ("Solstice," pp. 117-118)

Evoking the Afrikan oral tradition in poetry, this poem like the

book as a whole synthesizes many experiences into one.

For most women who enjoy poetry, this book will be a delight. Although Audre Lorde may not be totally clear on a first, or even a second reading—sometimes her language approaches the surreal—her poems are rich enough to send us back for new discoveries with each reading. There are over sixty poems here. I think every blakwoman can find some that speak to her.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES



DONNA ALLEGRA – I have to write as other people have to breathe in order to stay alive. Poetry is one of many tools in the writing trade that I work with. I expect to spend the rest of my days developing my craft just as surely as I expect to live and breathe.

LORRAINE BETHEL is a cullud lesbian feminist from Augusta, Georgia, presently living in Boston. Her interests are the politics/aesthetics of Black/women's fashion, literature, theatre and spirituality. She looks to THE BLACK GODDESS and her goddess send, Maua, for Black woman-identified strength, love and guidance, and thinks it strange to write something about yourself as if you were someone else.

BECKY BIRTHA was born in 1948. She is part of a lesbian writers workshop in Philadelphia. Many of her poems have appeared in *Azalea;* her short fiction will appear in *Sinister Wisdom,* and in the anthology, *A Woman's Touch.*

FAHAMISHA SHARIAT BROWN (born Patricia L. Brown) blakwoman/teacher/critic. Owns a bookstore in Roxbury, specializing in black and Third World literature. Student and teacher of Afrikan literatures with a special love for that of Afrikan women.

CHERYL CLARKE lives and writes in Highland Park, New Jersey. She is taurus, poet, lesbian, and social worker. Cheryl was born in Washington, D.C.–N.W. and lived there for twenty-two years. She has been writing poetry for ten years. Studied literature at Howard and Rutgers. Shares her life with three women: her lover and her lover's two daughters. Has published poetry in *Lady Unique Inclination of the Night,* a feminist journal of the goddess whose devotees reside also in Cheryl's community.

MICHELLE T. CLINTON has lived and worked in the Bay area's women's community for almost three years. This is her first publication.

WILLIE M. COLEMAN (born Williemae) writes poetry and prose from the Black female experience. (WHAT IT IS, RUMBLE, ENCORE, ESSENCE) She is winding up her dissertation on Black women with joy, great haste, and incantations to any spirits who will listen.

TOI DERRICOTTE's first book, *The Empress of the Death House,* was published in 1978 by Lotus Press. She teaches in the New Jersey Poets-in-the-School Program. She was born and grew up in Detroit, Michigan. She is presently living in New Jersey with her husband and seventeen-year-old son.

ALEXIS DE VEAUX is a New York bred poet, playwright, and novelist. Her plays have been produced in New York, Connecticut, and Chicago, and have been seen on the PBS series, VISIONS, as well as at the INPUT Public Television Conference recently in Milan, Italy. She recently completed a soon to be published biography of Billie Holiday.

AUDREY EWART resides in Brooklyn. She is striving, through living and writing, to leave the shoreline and plunge in.

RUTH FARMER lives in Brooklyn. She writes reviews, poetry, and is currently working on a novel. The poems appearing here are her first published work.

YVONNE A. FLOWERS – I'm a longtime struggling Black woman, struggling for women, for Africans everywhere, for everyone's orgasm sexual freedom and for wages for housework. I've done work as an educator, attendant, factory worker, therapist, street person and general agitator. Some freedom is not enough. I dream of all my selves being free.

CAROLE C. GREGORY is a creative writer and teacher. She is working on a novel about the steel mills in Ohio and on a children's book. Her work was last anthologized in a Third World anthology, *Giant Talk,* edited by Quincy Troupe.

BRENDA L. HAYWOOD, an artist who works in various media, studied at the Art Institute of Boston, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Massachusetts General Hospital School of Medical Illustration. She has had two, one-woman shows in suburban Boston and has exhibited her work in several inner city shows. Presently her designs are on exhibit in a feminist bookstore in Cambridge, Mass. She is a registered artist of Boston and a member of the International Society of Artists.

GLORIA T. HULL is an associate professor of English at the University of Delaware. She is happily looking forward to furthering the cause of Black feminist literary criticism by spending this academic year completing a book on women poets of the Harlem Renaissance (thanks to

a Rockefeller Foundation grant). One chapter of the work will be devoted to Angela Weld Grimké, the subject of her *Conditions* essay.

ELEANOR JOHNSON is a Black feminist therapist and a member of the Combahee River Collective—a Boston-based Black feminist activist organization. She acknowledges the work of her late grandmother, Hattie Mae Bell Brown Bradley, whose profession was cooking, cleaning, and "teaching." . . . and there is more to be done.

CHERYL L. JONES is an African-American woman who currently resides in Boston. She is director of a pre-school for disabled and able-bodied children. She considers herself fully involved with becoming a person in a world which devalues people and which supports hypocrisy.

MURIEL JONES lives and writes in Los Angeles, California. She is a Black feminist, professional nurse, and psychology student. Her present concern is the current Black crisis, cultural larceny.

PATRICIA JONES – Poet, reviewer, editor and publisher. Originally from Arkansas. Poems published in *Telephone, Chrysalis, HOO DOO, NIMROD,* and *Conditions: Two.* Poems forthcoming in *Synergy, Obsidian,* and *Chrysalis.* Co-editor and publisher of *Ordinary Women: An Anthology of New York City Women* (Ordinary Women Books, 1978). Currently working on a manuscript based on Arkansas terrain (mental and physical), and studying the novels of Nella Larsen. Also loves jazz, dancing, walking around, and being 28.

HILLARY KAY, black lesbian feminist, songwriter, performer, guitarist, crazywomon, gemini, who is presently living in Cambridge and having a grand old time.

AUDRE LORDE's most recent collection of poetry is *The Black Unicorn* (Norton, 1978). This piece is an excerpt from her forthcoming fiction entitled *I've Been Standing On This Streetcorner A Hell of A Long Time!*

DEIDRE McCALLA is a singer/songwriter/guitarist currently living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A full-time student at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music, she performs with *Gypsy,* an acoustic jazz/folk duo, and *Breakwater,* a six-woman jazz/rock band.

CHIRLANE McCRAY is a freelance writer and former editorial assistant at *Redbook Magazine* living in New York. She is the author of "Beyond Fear: A Lesbian Speaks," published in the September 1979 issue of *Essence Magazine.*

PAT PARKER is a Black, Lesbian, Feminist Poet, who lives in Oakland, Ca. She has published four books of poetry, one album, and one song. She has read her work all over the U.S. and Europe, appearing before audiences from 10 to 100,000 people.

MICHELLE D. PARKERSON, 26, is a native daughter of Washington, D.C. She is currently a television engineer for Metromedia, Inc. She is a performance poet and a filmmaker, now completing a documentary on jazz vocalist, Betty Carter.

LINDA C. POWELL is a Black feminist activist who lives and works in New York City. She is presently at work on a series of oral histories of Black feminists and her career as a singer and songwriter.

RASHIDA – cloakroom, lesbian medical student in Michigan, struggling with professionalization, secretly aspiring to write Black lesbian/feminist literature. Her poetry has appeared in *Azalea.*

DONNA KATE RUSHIN – grew up in Camden and Lawnside, N.J. She attended Oberlin College and received fellowships from the Mass. Arts and Humanities Foundation and The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Currently, she is in residence at Cummington Community of the Arts.

ANN ALLEN SHOCKLEY is an Associate Librarian at Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee. She has published numerous articles and short stories in magazines and professional journals. She is the author of the novel, *Loving Her,* and co-editor of the reference books, *Living Black American Authors* and *A Handbook of Black Librarianship,* the latter nominated for the 1978 Ralph R. Shaw Award for outstanding contribution to library literature. Presently working on another novel.

JUDY SIMMONS' poems appear in *Judith's Blues* (Broadside/Crummel Press), in anthologies such as *Giant Talk* and *Celebration,* and in various periodicals. The 35-year-old Rhode Island Virgo graduated from California State U., Sacramento, in psychology, writes articles for *Black Enterprise* and *Family Circle,* and produces radio programs on WBAI–NY.

JANET SINGLETON is a twenty-four-year-old free-lance writer living in Denver. Among her works is a pamphlet entitled *Sisters* to be released this fall by Rocky Mountain Planned Parenthood. The booklet's focus is sexuality, survival, and birth control for the black female adolescent.

BARBARA SMITH is the co-editor of *Conditions: Five, The Black Women's Issue.* She is currently working on her Ph.D. thesis, a Black feminist

analysis of four Afro-American women writers. Her article, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," appeared in *Conditions: Two.*

BEVERLY SMITH has decided not to be so solemn in this note. She is, however, quite serious. She is a mostly unrequited romantic who likes "potato chips, moonlight and motor trips." Her favorite flowers are anemones and she's attracted to women who resemble them. She lives alone (?) with several teddy bears in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

NIOBEH TSABA, singer, bassist, songwriter, and composer, has been writing and performing songs about the struggles and joys of black and lesbian women since her "formative years" in the Great Lakes region of Ohio. At 27, she is presently living in Portland, Oregon where she continues to write and play for rallies, benefits, and concerts as a soloist and as bassist in all-woman jazz band *Steam Heat.*

MARY WATKINS is a pianist, composer, arranger, performer, and songwriter. After earning a degree in composition from Howard University, she worked as a musical director for a Black Theatre in Washington, D.C., and later moved to Los Angeles. In 1978, she made the Olivia album, *Something Moving.* She plays with a four-piece group and is increasingly performing as a solo pianist.

RENITA WEEMS lives and works in New York City.

Books and albums by contributors to CONDITIONS: FIVE *include:*

Toi Derricotte, *The Empress of the Death House* (Lotus Press, Box 601, College Park Station, Detroit, Mich. 48221), 1978, 51 pp., $2.50.

Alexis De Veaux, *Na-ni* (Harper & Row), 1973, $3.50.

Audre Lorde, *Between Our Selves* (Eidolon Editions, Box 629, Pt. Reyes, CA), 1976, $3.50; *The Black Unicorn* (W.W. Norton), 1978, $9.95, cloth, $3.95, paper; *Coal* (W.W. Norton), 1976, $7.95, cloth, $2.95, paper; *From a Land Where Other People Live* (Broadside Press, Dept. M.O., 12651 Old Mill Place, Detroit, MI 48238), 1973, $1.50 plus .25 postage; *The New York Head Shop and Museum* (Broadside), $3.50 plus .25 postage; *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (Out & Out Pamphlet, 476 Second St., Brooklyn, NY 11215), 1978, $1.00.

Pat Parker, *Child of Myself,* 1972, $2.00 plus .30 p/h; *"Movement in Black," The Collected Poetry of Pat Parker,* 1978, $8.75 plus $1.31 p/h; *Pit Stop,* 1973, $2.00 plus .30 p/h; *Womanslaughter,* 1978, $3.00 plus .45 p/h; above books available from Diana Press, 4400 Market St., Oakland, CA 94608; *Where Would I Be Without You: The Poetry of Pat Parker and Judy Grahn,* album (Olivia Records, 4400 Market St., Oakland, CA 94608), 1976, $5.00 (California add .30 tax) plus $1.00 p/h.

Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (Avon), 1978 (orig. 1974), $1.75; *Living Black American Authors: A Biographical Directory,* edited with Sue P. Chandler (Bowker), 1973, $14.95.

Mary Watkins, *Something Moving,* album (Olivia Records), 1978.

Work by contributors to CONDITIONS: FIVE *is included in the following small-press collections:*

Advance Token to Boardwalk (Poets and Writers of New Jersey, P.O. Box 52, Upper Montclair, N.J.), 1977, 161 pp., $3.95, *Toi Derricotte*

Amazon Poetry: An Anthology, Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin, eds. (Out & Out Books), $2.00 plus .35 p/h, *Audre Lorde, Pat Parker*

Centerwords (Washington Women's Art Center, 1821 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009), 1978, 42 pp., $2.95, *Michelle D. Parkerson*

Indigene: An Anthology of Future Black Arts (Black History Museum Umum Publishers, P.O. Box 15057, Philadelphia, PA 19130), 105 pp., $5.95, *Michelle D. Parkerson*

Jemima From the Heart (c/o R. Christian, 314 E. 91st St. Apt. 5E, New York, NY 10028), $2.50, *Donna Allegra, Yvonne Flowers*

New Poets: Women (Les Femmes, 231 Adrian Road, Millbrae, CA 94030), 1976, 152 pp., $4.95, *Toi Derricotte*

Ordinary Women: An Anthology of New York City Women (Ordinary Women Books, P.O. Box 664, Old Station, New York, NY 10011), 1978, $3.95 plus .42 p/h, *Patricia Jones*

Women Surviving Massacres and Men (Anemone Press, 1612 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009), $2.00 plus postage, *Patricia Jones*

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED:

PUBLICATIONS BY BLACK WOMEN:

Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, eds., *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature* (Anchor Books), 422 pp., $5.95.

Blacksong Series I: Four Poetry Broadsides by Black Women, Four poster-poems (Lotus Press, P.O. Box 21607, Detroit, Michigan 48221), $2.50.

Juliet Bowles, ed., *In the Memory and Spirit of Frances, Zora and Lorraine: Essays and Interviews Relating to Black Women and Writing* (Institute for the Arts and the Humanities, P.O. Box 723, Howard University, Washington, D.C. 20001), 125 pp.

Melba Joyce Boyd, *Cat Eyes and Dead Wood,* poems with drawings by Michele G. Russell (Fallen Angel Press, Highland Park, Mich.), 1978, $5.00.

Pamela Cobb, *Inside the Devil's Mouth* (Lotus Press), 42 pp., $1.95.

Thulani N. Davis, *All the Renegade Ghosts Rise* (Anemone Press, 1612 19th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009), 62 pp.

Toi Derricotte, *The Empress of the Death House* (Lotus Press), 51 pp., $2.50.

Rosa Guy, *Edith Jackson* (Viking), 187 pp., $8.95.

Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg Penn, eds., *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (National University Publications, Kennikat Press Corp., 90 South Bayles Ave., Port Washington, N.Y. 11050), 1978, $12.95.

Lea Hopkins, *I'm Not Crazy, Just Different* ("Womyn," P.O. Box 4431, Overland Park, Kansas 66212), 19 pp., $3.00 plus postage.

————, *Womyn I Have Known You* ("Womyn"), unpaged, $5.95 plus postage.

Barbara Jordan and Shelby Hearon, *Barbara Jordan: A Self-Portrait* (Doubleday), 269 pp., $9.95.

Pinkie Gordon Lane, *The Mystic Female,* poems (South and West, Inc., 2406 South S Street, Fort Smith, Arkansas 72901), 52 pp., $5.00.

Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (Out & Out Pamphlet, 476 Second St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215), 1978, $1.00.

Naomi Long Madgett, *Exits and Entrances* (Lotus Press), 69 pp., $3.50.

May Miller, *Dust of Uncertain Journey* (Lotus Press), 67 pp., $3.50.

Pauli Murray, *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* (Harper & Row), 280 pp., $12.95.

Jeanne Noble, *Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters: A History of the Black Woman in America* (Prentice-Hall), 353 pp., $12.50.

Pat Parker, *Movement in Black: The Collected Poetry of Pat Parker, 1961-1978* (Diana Press, Inc., 4400 Market St., Oakland, CA. 94608), 1978, $8.75.

————, *Womanslaughter* (Diana Press, Inc.), 1978.

Isetta Crawford Rawls, *Flashbacks* (Lotus Press), 38 pp., $2.00.

Sonia Sanchez, *I've Been a Woman,* poems (The Black Scholar Press, Box 908, 2656 Bridgeway, Sausalito, CA 94965), 1978, 101 pp., $4.95.

Joyce Sikakane, *A Window on Soweto* (International Defence & Aid Fund, 104 Newgate Street, London EC1), 1977, 80 pp.

Ellease Southerland, *Let the Lion Eat Straw,* a novel (Scribners), $7.95.

Dorothy Sterling, *Black Foremothers: Three Lives* (The Feminist Press), 167 pp., $4.25.

Alice Walker, *"Good Night Willie Lee": I'll See You in the Morning, New Poems (1971-1977)"* (Dial Press).

Paulette C. White, *Love Poem to a Black Junkie* (Lotus Press), 37 pp., $2.00.

Ora Williams, ed., *American Black Women in the Arts and Social Sciences: A Bibliographic Survey,* revised and expanded edition (Scarecrow Press), 197 pp.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

Andrea Abbott and Pamela Gray, *Room of Our Own: Poems by the Women's Writing Workshop* (Women's Studies College, SUNY at Buffalo), 1979.

Helen Adam, *Ghosts and Grinning Shadows: Two Witch Stories* (Hanging Loose Press, 231 Wyckoff St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217), 1979, 98 pp., $4.00.

Sarah Aldridge, *All True Lovers,* a novel (The Naiad Press, Inc., 7800 Westside Dr., Weatherby Lake, Missouri 64152), 1978, 282 pp., $6.75.

Teresa Anderson, *Speaking in Sign,* poems (West End Press, Box 697, Cambridge, MA 02139), 1979, 32 pp.

Cedar and Nelly, *A Woman's Touch* (Womanshare Books, distributed by Amazon Reality, P.O. Box 95, Eugene, Oregon 97440), 1979, 157 pp., $4.75.

Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: a Symbol of our Heritage* (Anchor Press), 256 pp., $12.95.

Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Women and Support Networks* (Out & Out Pamphlet, 476 Second St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215), 1979, 41 pp., $2.00.

Carol Cox, *Woodworking And Places NearBy,* poems (Hanging Loose Press), 1979, 65 pp., $3.00.

Miriam Dyak, *Dying* (New Victoria Publishers, Inc., 7 Bank Street, Lebanon, N.H. 03766), 1978, $3.00.

Doris Grumbach, *Chamber Music,* a novel (E.P. Dutton), 1979, 213 pp., $8.95.

Elizabeth Fisher, *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society* (Anchor Press), 1979, 504 pp., $12.95.

Margie Fusco, *Putting into Harbor,* poems (West End Press), 1978, 24 pp., $1.00.

Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (Harper & Row), 263 pp., $9.95.

Nancy Hoffman and Florence Howe, eds., *Women Working: An Anthology of Stories and Poems* (The Feminist Press/McGraw-Hill), 1979, 271 pp.

Linda Hogan, *Calling Myself Home* (The Greenfield Review Press, Greenfield Center, N.Y. 12833), 1978, 33 pp., $2.00.

Karol Hope and Nancy Young, *Out of the Frying Pan. . .: A Decade of Change in Women's Lives* (Anchor Press), 1979, 288 pp., $4.95.

Polly Joan and Andrea Chesman, *Guide to Women's Publishing* (Dustbooks, P.O. Box 100, Paradise, CA 95969), 1978, 296 pp., $4.95.

Muriel Lederer, *Blue-Collar Jobs for Women* (Dutton), 1979, 257 pp., $7.95.

Meridel LeSueur, *The Girl* (West End Press), 148 pp., $3.50.

Lucy R. Lippard, *I See/You Mean,* novel (Chrysalis Books, 635 S. Westlake Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90057), 1979, 149 pp., $5.95.

Mary McAnally, *We Will Make a River,* poems (West End Press), 1979, 40 pp., $2.00.

Carole Spearin McCauley, *Surviving Breast Cancer* (E.P. Dutton), 240 pp., $10.95.

Media Report to Women, *Index/Directory of Women's Media* (Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, 3306 Ross Place, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008), 1979, 81 pp., $8.00.

E. Ethelbert Miller, *Women Surviving Massacres And Men: Nine Women Poets* (Anemone Press, 1612 19th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009), 34 pp., $2.00.

Honor Moore, *Poem in Four Movements for my Sister Marian,* poem (Out & Out Books), $1.00.

Melanie Perish, *Notes of a Daughter from the Old Country,* poems (Motheroot Publications/Anne Pride, 214 Dewey Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15218), $1.75 plus $.25 p/h.

Barbara Ponse, *Identities in The Lesbian World: The Social Construct of Self* (Greenwood Press), 226 pp.

Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Beacon Press), 220 pp., $12.95.

Redstockings, *Feminist Revolution* (Random House, New York), 1978, 224 pp., $5.95.

Adrienne Rich, *The Meaning of Our Love for Women Is What We Have Constantly to Expand* (Out & Out Pamphlet), 1977, $1.00.

————, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (W.W. Norton), 310 pp., $13.95.

————, *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying* (Motheroot Publications), 1979, $2.00 plus $.50 p/h.

Lillian S. Robinson, *Sex, Class & Culture* (Indiana University Press), 1978, 349 pp.

Nan Thayer Ross, *Pay Attention,* a novel (Chrysalis Books), 1979, 104 pp., $4.95.

Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Ann Fetter, *In Defense of Ourselves: A Rape Prevention Handbook for Women* (Doubleday), 1979, 177 pp., $5.95.

Lynne D. Shapiro, ed., *Write on, Woman!: A Writers' & Artists' Guide to Women's Alternate Press Periodicals* (L.D. Shapiro, 345 W. 87th St., N.Y., N.Y. 10024), 1978, 64 pp.

Terri Schultz, *Women Can Wait: The Pleasures of Motherhood After Thirty* (Doubleday), 1979, 191 pp., $4.95.

May Swenson, *New & Selected Things Taking Place* (Little, Brown and Co.), 1978, 301 pp., $7.95.

Beverly Tanenhaus, *To Know Each Other And Be Known: Women's Writing Workshops* (Out & Out Books), 1978, 70 pp., $3.50.

Maryann Turner, *Biblioteca Femina: A Herstory of Book Collections Concerning Women,* illustrated by Ellen Turner (celebrating women productions, c/o Buckwheat Turner, P.O. Box 251, Warrensburg, N.Y. 12885), 1978, 116 pp., $5.00.

Stephanie L. Twin, *Out of the Bleachers: Writings on Women and Sport* (The Feminist Press/McGraw-Hill), 1979, 229 pp.

Alma Villanueva, *Mother, May I?,* poems (Motheroot Publications), 40 pp., $3.00 plus $.25 p/h.

Mary Webb, *Precious Bane,* novel (Virago Modern Classics, 5 Wardour Street, London W1V 3HE), 1978, 288 pp., $5.25.

Batya Weinbaum, *The Curious Courtship of Women's Liberation and Socialism* (South End Press, Box 63, Astor Station, MA 02123), 167 pp., $4.00.

Celeste West and Valerie Wheat, *The Passionate Perils of Publishing* (Booklegger Press, 555 29th Street, San Francisco, CA 94131), 1978, 76 pp., $5.00.

Antonia White, *Frost in May* (Virago Modern Classics), 1978, 221 pp., $5.00.

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Patricia McElligott in *Motheroot Journal*

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PROSE POEM by Michelle Cliff.

FICTION by Sandy Boucher, Erika Duncan, Ellen Garvey, Susan Krieger, Janet Sternburg.

ESSAYS: "Finding our Roots in the Homeless Women" by Stephanie Golden; "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response" by Audre Lorde; "Letters from Black Feminists" by Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith.

REVIEWS: *Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park* by Nellie Wong (reviewed by Jan Clausen); *For Their Triumphs and For Their Tears: Conditions and Resistance of Women in Apartheid South Africa* by Hilda Bernstein (reviewed by Pamela Denyse Trunk); *The Maimie Papers* edited by Ruth Rosen and Sue Davidson (reviewed by Liz Hess); *The Notebooks That Emma Gave Me: The Autobiography of a Lesbian* by Kay Van Deurs (reviewed by Blanche Wiesen Cook); *The Pearl Bastard* by Lillian Halegua (reviewed by Rima Shore); *Sometimes I Think of Maryland* by Jodi Braxton (reviewed by Gloria T. Hull); *Take One Blood Red Rose* by Mary Joan Coleman (reviewed by Elly Bulkin).

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THE FEMINIST WRITER'S GUILD is a national service and political organization. We are beginning our third year with a major outreach effort to Third World women, southern women, as well as all women writing in isolation. We are working to build strong networks of communication and support between all of us who write. Membership is $10 a year, $5 for unemployed. We publish a newsletter three times a year. Members of the National Steering Committee will answer questions you may have. Write: THE FEMINIST WRITER'S GUILD, P.O. Box 9396, Berkeley, CA 94709.

THIRD WORLD WOMEN

Cher'rie Moraga-Lawrence, Gloria Anzaldua, and friends are compiling a list of Third World Women writers, artists, scholars, performers, and political activists. They hope to set up a network of women of color who may be called upon to give presentations, readings, workshops, or participate in conferences. They hope to make this list available to women's studies departments and other interested feminist organizations. If you would like to be included, please send a short biographical sketch to Gloria Anzaldua, 948 Noe Street, San Francisco, CA 94114 or Merlin Stone, Box 159, Village Station, New York, NY 10014.

NAIAD PRESS

Naiad press is beginning work on the third edition of THE LESBIAN IN LITERATURE, expected to contain at least 7,000 entries (twice the size of the second edition). Several women are needed to volunteer their services as research assistants–requires no basic skills beyond typing and general familiarity with libraries. You will work with Naiad Press by correspondence; time requirement will be no more than a few hours a week for a few months. Full credit for the work will be given in the book. Financial help would also be greatly appreciated. Please write to Barbara Grier, c/o Naiad press, 7800 Westside Drive, Weatherby Lake, MO 64152, or call 816-741-2283.

ADVERTISING

CONDITIONS is now accepting advertising from women's businesses, presses, magazines, etc.

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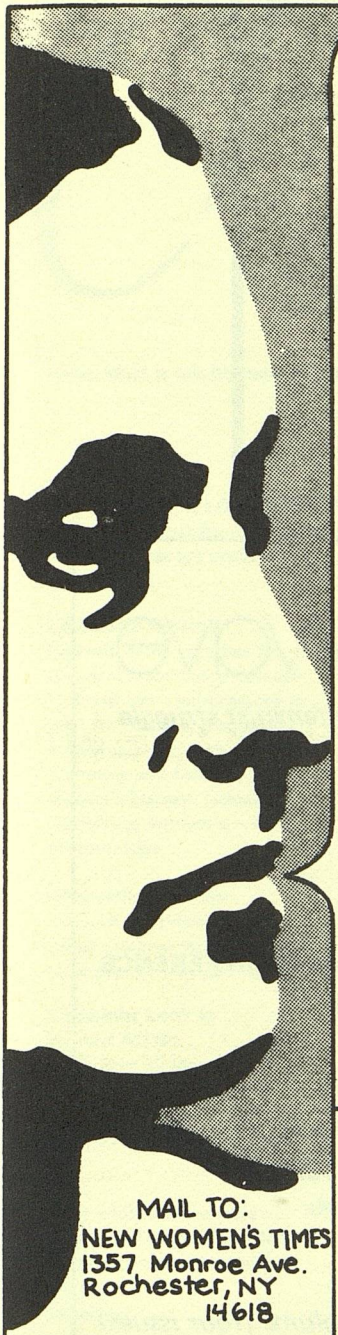

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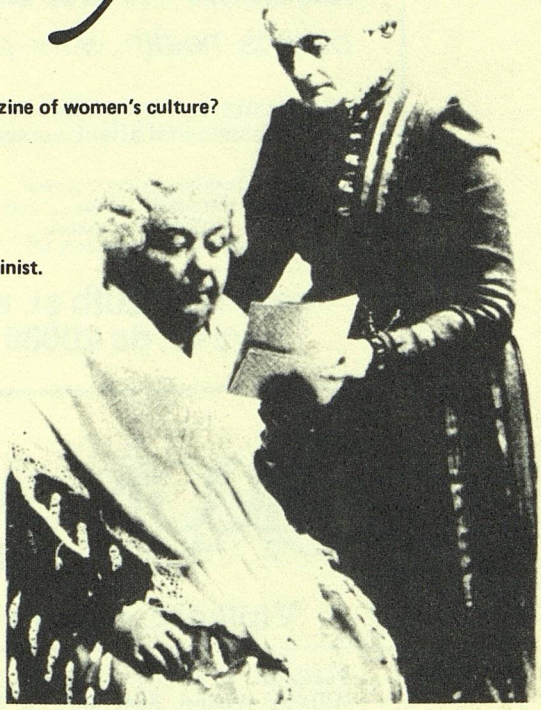

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PROSE POEMS

Alexis De Veaux, Patricia Jones

SONG LYRICS

Hillary Kay, Deidre McCalla, Niobeh Tsaba, Mary Watkins

JOURNALS

Audrey Ewart, Muriel Jones, Janet Singleton, Beverly Smith

FICTION

"Tar Beach" by Audre Lorde
"Jonetta" by Rashida

ESSAYS

" 'Under the Days': The Buried Life and Poetry of Angelina Weld Grimké" by Gloria T. Hull

"Reflections: On Black Feminist Therapy" by Eleanor Johnson

"The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview" by Ann Allen Shockley

"Notes for Yet Another Paper on Black Feminism, or Will the Real Enemy Please Stand Up?" by Barbara Smith

" 'Artists Without Art Form': A Look at One Black Woman Writer's World of Unrevered Black Women" by Renita Weems

REVIEWS

Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman by Michele Wallace
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