CONDITIONS: SEVEN

a magazine of writing by women

with an emphasis on writing by lesbians

Subscription rates (three issues): $11 for individuals ($6 "hardship" rate) and $22 for institutions. Single copies: $4.50 for individuals, $8.00 for institutions. Bookstore orders of 5 or more receive a 40% discount. Orders should be directed to *Conditions,* P.O. Box 56, Van Brunt Station, Brooklyn, New York 11215.

Conditions is free upon request to women in prisons and mental institutions.

Conditions accepts advertising at the following rates:

CLASSIFIED ADS: *Women's/gay presses and businesses, small presses:* 25 cents per word, 10 word minimum. *Commercial presses:* 50 cents per word, 20 word minimum. DISPLAY ADS: *Women's/gay presses and businesses, and small presses:* Full-page (4½" x 7")–$100; half-page (4½" x 3½")–$50; quarter-page (2" x 3½")–$25. *Commercial presses:* Full-page–$150; half-page–$75. Display ads must be in the form of camera-ready copy. All ads must be accompanied by a check or money order. Copy is accepted at the discretion of the editors.

Submissions will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

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Conditions **was founded in 1976 by Elly Bulkin, Jan Clausen, Irena Klepfisz, and Rima Shore.**

Conditions: Seven **was typeset by Gail Murray.**

Distribution of *Conditions* **is coordinated by Shelley Messing.**

Cover: Camas Series Pastel (40" x 30") by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (photo by F.A. Ambrose): ". . . my pictographic narration of women in camp with meat hanging to dry, animals, etc. They trail across the landscape lacing the piece together, but also because they did trail across the landscape at one time. Also it is an abstract aerial view of the landscape."

Conditions *is edited by Elly Bulkin, Jan Clausen, and Rima Shore. We work collectively to select and edit material which will reflect women's perceptions of themselves, each other, the conditions of their lives, and of the world around them.*

This collective process is a difficult one. We have found that we do not always agree or identify with viewpoints expressed by the women we publish, or with each other.

Because we do not proceed from a single conception of what Conditions *should be, we feel it is especially important to receive critical and personal reactions to the writing we publish.*

TO OUR READERS:

Although we gave you a detailed progress and financial report in *Conditions: Six,* we want to bring you up-to-date on events since that issue went to press.

At the time *Conditions: Six* appeared, Irena Klepfisz had recently told us of her need to take a partial leave-of-absence from the editorial collective because of the demands of her paying job. Having done that, Irena found that the ongoing pressures of full-time employment, together with her need for writing time, made it impossible for her to resume editorial work. We very much regret the loss of her editorial perspective, which for five years has had such an important influence in creating and shaping *Conditions.*

In the area of finances, several developments seem worthy of mention. In summer, 1980, we received from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines (CCLM) an Editorial Fellowship of $5,000. Ten such fellowships are awarded by CCLM each year, for the purpose of allowing editors to devote additional time to work on their literary magazines. We were particularly pleased that a substantial percentage of feminist periodicals received these awards in 1980, since in 1979—the first year of the fellowship program—all had gone to male editors. (A feminist protest following the announcement of the 1979 awards no doubt had an impact on the decision-making process.) Since the money was divided among *Conditions'* editors, the award was to some extent a nominal one; nevertheless, it represents the only substantial payment we have received, or seem likely to receive, for our editorial work, and we were greatly encouraged by it.

Partly in order to offset rising costs—including postage, paper, printing and the expense of a newly-rented office (a necessity after years of accumulating boxes, files, and back issues in our living rooms)—we are raising prices for subscriptions and single copies. The price for a single copy of *Conditions* (including available back issues) will now be $4.50 to individuals, $8.00 to institutions. Regular subscriptions (3 issues) will now be $11.00 to individuals, and $22.00 to institutions. At the same time we are maintaining our old "hardship" subscription rate of $6.00 for women who for any reason cannot afford the regular rate, as well as our policy of providing free subscriptions upon request to women in prisons and mental institutions. Supporting subscriptions ($25.00 or more) are particularly welcomed to help offset these below-cost subscriptions. We urge those of you

who have purchased single copies to subscribe. In order to improve our financial position, we need to increase not only our total circulation, but also the percentage of copies sold through subscription.

These price changes also represent an effort to reduce our dependence on grant support. In the past year we put out two issues, with a total budget of $18,000; of this amount, $8,000 came from grants. We are painfully aware of the dangers of reliance on outside support, particularly in the present political climate. Directly relevant to the issue of funding for *Conditions* and similar periodicals is the Family Protection Act. That Act, to be re-introduced in the current congressional session, would mandate a cut-off of all federal funding to lesbian and gay organizations. The proposed fifty-percent cut in the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts, which both directly and through CCLM has helped to fund *Conditions,* is also ominous.

We feel that it is important to mention these budget measures in their larger political context. While we came to no agreement about a collective political message, nor even about the wisdom of sending one, we all felt that we could not speak about the effect of budget cuts on our magazine without expressing outrage that those same cuts, and the political forces which have inspired them, endanger the very lives of millions of people, especially poor women and children, and especially those people who do not have the privilege accorded in this society to those of us who are white.

As we prepare to send *Conditions: Seven* to the printer, we find ourselves in an increasingly repressive and threatening environment. In that context, we sometimes feel a certain irony in our concentration on producing a small-circulation literary magazine. At the same time, we believe that the existence of lesbian, feminist, and other small-press periodicals, as of all radical or alternative resources, is more vital than ever.

A word about our plans for the near future. The three of us who continue to edit *Conditions* have been working on the magazine since the summer of 1976. Added to the weight of our other responsibilities and involvements, the ongoing burden of this work is tremendous. We have been discussing for some time the need to rethink the way in which the work of producing *Conditions* gets accomplished. Irena's departure makes the situation even more critical. We must now take a short break from reading manuscripts and putting out another issue, in order to assess alternatives

and initiate reorganization. We therefore will not begin to consider submissions for *Conditions: Eight* until autumn.

We thank you for your continuing support.

Elly Bulkin
Jan Clausen
Rima Shore

CONDITIONS: SEVEN

Vol. III No. 1 Spring 1981

POETRY

PROSE POEM

FICTION

ESSAYS

REVIEWS

RESPONSE

SOPHIE

October 5, 1972

Early freezing rain. Saw a plane overhead.

My room is full of these notes and I cling to them. *October 1, 1960–Killed rooster.* I used his feathers for this pillow I speak to on long nights. And I dream over it of haggard women, of a young girl whose mother had the high-cheeked, wide face of an Indian, and straight lashes. I dream ghosts and fears, my own life. And then I write.

Some of these notes are written on the yellowed backs of funeral home calendars, some on sheets of music, Christmas cards I received over the years. Here is one written on Gray-West funeral home paper, a blue 1924 calendar with a picture of stone angels on front: *March 3, 1925–Coldest spring coming. Birds arrived early. Nearly starving. Fed them cornbread.* That year when birds fell out of the sky like they had been shot. It seemed the very earth would freeze and remain hard to our needs. When the wildflowers finally bloomed, they fed the eyes. They were the most beautiful flowers I have seen. And the birds grew so fat they could barely fly above the trees. The river was full of fish.

This writing is how I keep track of it all. How I remember Francie, the chicken who rode my shoulder while I shoveled snow. She had red feathers the color of pennies, and bulging eyes. Her claws were old twigs. I wrote that on one of these pieces of paper. About her chasing grasshoppers and pecking death into a frog.

And I wrote about the young woman from town who came out to ask me about herbs. She was a small woman with a long, blonde braid down the center of her back. She took a picture of me with a new camera that develops film while it is in your hand. She pulled out the curled paper. Soon, there was my face growing from nothing into old age. Like I was being painted by the spirits. My face coming into being on the other side of eyes. I wrote on the back of that picture

how many things were not in my face. And I wrote also what was there: *June 21, 1964–Sophie grows white hair that looks like a waterfall with no place to go. Sophie grows toothless. Sophie grows a loose neck.*

I chop my own wood to feed the fire. I feed my animals. Tom the bull puts his head on my shoulder when I walk near and looks at me with his sooty eyes. I know him. He is watching to see if he will outlast me.

Snow came early this year and when I go outside I have to lift my boots high. I try to follow in my own tracks. My feet grow numb. My mother told the story of a person who followed their own tracks so long they became nothing. But here I think I am something because I see all the way around the bend of earth to the east. The clouds take shape, white trout, slow-moving cats, an eye of the sky looking down at me.

There was a stray cat here once. Black and white like the landscape at night. And soft to touch with these calloused hands and split nails. There was a dog too. One I ordered through the catalogue. And singing birds, yes, I've always kept singing birds like those little finches. Canaries, sometimes. And the seashells I have strung all over my house, they sing in the wind and scare the crows away.

October 8, 1972

Now that I have been thinking about old age, I see that my ankles have swollen, the skin has grown thin and sheer with a spider's web of little veins. Dark spots on my hands. Bad knuckles. And I think about death now.

When I think about that I begin to fear the ants though they are such small things. I begin to think of the mountains which will swallow me, the plains to the east on which I will be blown. It makes me fear nature, the place I live. It makes me long to have the soft white hands of a city woman, hair which is subdued. But no, here my blood sings in my ears. And it does not matter if the entire earth becomes a vulture, this is my home. Still, there are times when it frightens me.

While I looked at myself, my ankles and hands, I looked in the polished metal at my face. White Eye, the people used to call me and still my eyes are pale blue like a blind animal. My skin is dark. My hair is white and thin.

My father was a trapper. He traveled around to reservations and when he'd come back he would teach us some new words and sometimes a song or two. When things are too quiet those songs make you feel better. When the river, like now, is hard around the fish, then I sing some of the songs and beat out a rhythm on this table.

I write these things because it is like planting seeds. They grow and are with me to harvest. Like my name. I carved it over the door. SOPHIE. Under this name I walk daily, entering and going out. It is my home. It holds up to the strongest winds. I sleep in it.

I write sometimes at night beside an oil lamp and it is like a river beginning to move. Earth crumbles and falls into the water. My thoughts begin to flow with the ground I have walked on.

March 26, 1960–The ice cracked on the trees. Old Sam hit with a broken branch. He was the dog I trained to carry fire wood for me.

October 10, 1972

Many years ago I used to work in kitchens of feed houses. Those were like hotels mostly. I cooked and cleaned and laundered towels. But it was like stillbirth. The light was always dim. Breath took the form of coughs. At night people would cough in the back rooms. Or behind a curtain someone would sleep on the kitchen floor and they would cough. Those without money could not afford an appetite. They could not be born and so they remained in the back rooms of damp buildings breathing the bad air, the smell of glue, of animals rendered into paper paste.

That was why I decided to come here. I had my two sons and I knew I could raise chickens and grow fresh vegetables and that would be better than a life in the east or in San Francisco or Seattle. I brought a few hairpins, a catalogue where I could order chickens to be sent to me. I brought letters from people I have known.

When I was first here there were others, neighbors. They helped me build, they baked bread. We cleared the road of stones and swept it. I played the fiddle and they danced. No one was coughing. No one spitting up blood. Faces were filled out and flushed with color.

I have been running a successful business here. I hunt and trap. I sell cream and eggs in town. I am quiet and there are strong things

that live in silence. I don't like those radios because there are too many voices and they sound lonesome, talking without leaving any space for silence. The voices travel through you, through the walls to enter this room. They are like the dead, moving through solid things.

October 11, 1972

When I first came here I came with, among other small things, a basket of potatoes, salted beef and a black umbrella to shield the sun. It had a flower on it that came from Paris. I thought that was amusing, the daughter of a trapper and an Indian woman being gifted with a yellow silk flower from Paris. But when I was young I had a long neck, a narrow line of jaw. Black hair.

Some years ago I wrote this note: *They graze cattle on my land. Clip my fences. The others have moved out.* I do not remember the year, but there was a grazing act in government. Some men took possession of my land and began trickling cattle in, one by one. I would repair my fence and at night they would cut it down again. I remember this well, I would wake up in the morning to find the cattle there, slow and scary-eyed eating my crops. They stomped down the land like they were tamping a grave to keep the wolves away. Wolves, what wolves those men were. They killed my chickens and my angora rabbits and nailed them to the fence posts. They had me arrested by the sheriff for interfering with their grazing.

They left. The land was no longer full of grass for the cattle. The people all around here had given up and moved. I slept with my rifle beside me. They left me poor as a snake, except that a snake has food. It has a place to live. It has clothing and eyes that are always open.

But when they were gone this land was mine again. I walked over the short, nibbled grass. I looked again up at the wide curve of sky. I threw that Paris flower, yellow silk and all, up into the air and walked away before it could land.

October 12, 1972

I go through these papers. A note about the year of the ants, when they were everywhere and I had to dig a ditch outside the door, line it with canvas and oil so that the ants could not pass inside. I

chinked all the cracks in the house. They were thick moving toward me. They crawled through the fur of my milk cows. They were as land hungry as those grazers had been.

I write this as I have written before: *Fixed windows. Dug potatoes.* Last night I went out walking under the moon. A lovely fall night. Almost winter, there is snow. Just that touch of it in the air. Last winter I snow-shoed on a full moon night, all blue, the surface of snow. Walking through the trees. Quiet. A rabbit's track like stitches on one of my white quilts. Last night the aspens had golden leaves, touched with snow. I do not expect to see another person until summer when the land is dry.

People might wonder how an old woman such as I am can snowshoe. When I get tired I dig a hole into the snow and sleep there. I am used to this body, I have lived in it so long.

May 5, 1957–Baby broke windows. I once had a horse that could open the door and walk in to snuffle for a potato. What a spoiled thing she was. When I fixed the door so that she could not enter, she walked around the house hitting and breaking the windows with her nose. That is how she got her way. After that I left the door ajar.

October 13, 1972

I was married at thirteen to a man who had one ear missing, as well as a side of his nose. This happened because of a bear.

That man had a parting of ways from me and I have been mostly alone since that time. He was the father of my oldest son.

People give me a headache. One woman, a ranchwoman, dug old burial places on her land and collected a roomful of pottery, axes and arrowheads. Black obsidian arrowheads and little jewel-like things. She kept it all locked up. She found a human jawbone. She took these things out of their place and kept them in her home but these relics put a curse on her. And she worried that someone would steal them. She locked her house. She stayed inside, afraid someone would come in and kill her for the little things.

One day her cow broke its leg, stuck in some mud. She was afraid to go take care of it, or to even spend the time dressing it out to eat. It lay there, on one side, bellowing a little and bloating until

it died from so much gas, swelled up like a water bag.

The woman stayed inside, worrying herself thin. And she finally died there, a young woman too, inside that room with the human jawbone and the little relics of death.

For me, I value the cattle. Buttercup. Goldenrod. I care for the horsebeans and carrots I grow and for the canary and the goldfish that swims above my table. I write this diary. *July 15, 1965–Looked for hammer. Played fiddle.*

October 14, 1972

Today Old Tom returned. He's been on one of his jaunts as bulls will sometimes do. He loves being lost, that feeling of being out in the woods. But even more he loves coming home to a handful of salt. I got him some salt when I heard his bells coming up the way. I hauled water from the creek. Extra water for the barrels outside. Winter is coming and this is the last thaw. I already miss the sound of June bugs hitting against the lantern.

I took out my black lace dress from the trunk. Played the fiddle for a while. Collected dried wheat and some straw for the table. It is good to walk outside. Old people can walk in beauty, mother used to say. And it is true. Walking across the earth's surface, looking up at the Bald Mountains, seeing a hawk. We walk light-footed and feeling the pull of earth. It pulls us toward it, back home. My body may be bent but my feet still move with ease across the ground. I may be brittle but my skin still bends. My ears hear the creaking of trees. My eyes see everything. And the things I see are who I am.

October 15, 1972

I do not live with dresses rustling about my legs, or with large bonnets or hats with nets. I am a woman who gossips with animals, who puts leather hinges on the door and swings heavy black iron kettles. No small feet. No pinched waist. I am a woman. I know how to work. I carry wood on my back. This face is like the earth with its lines of dry riverbeds, the weather worn into it. Where I plant, everything grows. Where I walk I leave beauty. I walk along the edge of the sky.

For S.C. (1881-1972)

LEAVING

Four o'clock this morning there was a call.
She talked Indian, so it was probably her mother.
It was. Something not too drastic, tone of voice,
no deaths or car wrecks. But something. I was
out of the sheets, unwrapped from the blankets,
fighting to stay in sleep. Slipped in and out of her
voice. Her voice on the line.
She came back to me. Lit cigarette blurred in the dark
and an ashtray. All lights off but that. Laid
her body down next to me. Empty, these final hours
before my leaving.

Her sister was running away from her boyfriend and
was stranded in Calgary, Alberta. Needed money
and comfort for the long return back home.

I dreamed of a Canadian plain, and warm arms around me,
the soft skin of the body's landscape. And I dreamed
of bear, and a thousand mile escape homeward.

WHITE BEAR

She begins to board the flight
    to Albuquerque. Late night.
But stops in the corrugated tunnel,
    a space between leaving and staying,
where the night sky catches

        her whole life

she has felt like a woman
    balancing on a wooden nickle heart
approaching herself from here to
    there, Tulsa or New York,
with knives or corn meal.

The last flight someone talked
    about how coming from Seattle
the pilot flew a circle
    over Mt. St. Helens; she sat
quiet. (But had seen the eruption
    as the earth beginning
to come apart, as in birth
    out of violence.)

She watches the yellow lights
    of towns below the airplane flicker,
fade and fall backwards. Somewhere,
    she dreamed, there is the white bear
moving down from the north, motioning her paws
    like a long arctic night, that kind
of circle and the whole world balanced in
    between carved of ebony and ice

        oh so hard

the clear black nights
    like her daughter's eyes, and the white
bear moon, cupped like an ivory rocking
    cradle, tipping back it could go
either way
            all darkness
                    is open to all light.

TALKING TO THE MOON No. 002

Moon
you lift your white skirts
over your thighs.
I want you this way,
soft river
in the dark.

TALKING TO THE MOON No. 003

You took me to the rodeo
at Window Rock, moon.
Dry heat in the afternoon
and Indian cowboys rolled and
rocked on sweat-stained saddles.
They took numbers and rode them
flew soaked into a violent dust.
You took yours on the back
of a terrified reservation horse
and dove through the gate
in a tidal storm, out
of the arena into the motionless
Arizona hot sky.
The p.a. system crackled and
groaned. Purple syrup made puddles
in the dirt. Smeared faces of children
watched you and your horse disappear
like balloons let loose from a department
store.

You left me at the rodeo,
moon.

The dance of bulls, and grotesque balancing
of horses continued in the melting sun,
like it always had—and everyone
forgot your flight, except for me
and the bright stars of gazing children
and the intuitive muscles of livestock
galloping on.

SEPTEMBER MOON

Last night she called and told me
about the moon over San Francisco Bay.
Here in Albuquerque it is mirrored
in a cool, dark Sandia mountained
sky. The reflection is within
all of us. Orange, and almost
the harvest moon. Wind and
the chill of the colder months coming
on. The children and I watched it,
crossing San Pedro and Central
coming up from the state fair.
Wind blowing my hair was caught
in my face. I was fearful of traffic,
trying to keep my steps and the moon was east,
ballooning out of mountain ridge out of smokey clouds
out of any skin that was covering her. Naked.
Such beauty.
Look.
We are alive. The woman of the moon looking
at us, and we looking at her, acknowledging
each other's presence.

BEVERLY SMITH with JUDITH STEIN
and PRISCILLA GOLDING

"THE POSSIBILITY OF LIFE BETWEEN US"[1]
A DIALOGUE BETWEEN BLACK AND JEWISH WOMEN

Introduction*

Last winter, five women from the Boston area got together to discuss our connections to each other as Black and Jewish women. We met four times, taping our discussions so that they could later be used as the basis for this article. The impetus for having these dialogues came from the controversy related to the publishing of the poem "Minority" by Judy Simmons which appeared in Conditions Five: The Black Women's Issue. *While the decision to publish the poem was being made, Mary Nelson, one of the participants in the following dialogue, suggested that an article based on discussions between Jewish and Black women would be a way of more thoroughly exploring the complex issues raised by the poem.*[2]

I have acted as coordinator and editor of the discussions as well as participating in them. The selection of other participants was based on my asking friends I wanted to include and getting their suggestions about other women who they thought would be interested. Eventually we ended up with a group of three Black and two Jewish women, some of whom were close friends, some of whom were acquaintances, and some of whom had not met each other before the discussions. An unspoken requirement for participation was a commitment to feminism. Our shared feminism was an important element in the success of these discussions. Other characteristics which gave us common ground were that we are all Lesbians, we all grew up in working-class or lower middle-class families, and we are all college graduates.

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*This Introduction, and all italicized passages in this article, were written by Beverly Smith.

Something we agreed on from the beginning was that food is an important part of our cultures and we wanted to have food to accompany our discussions. Since there were only five of us we couldn't quite depend on potluck so we made many phone calls back and forth to coordinate our contributions. Having food at all our meetings gave them a friendly, social atmosphere and also provided some emotional comfort while discussing difficult topics. Our meetings were held at the Cambridge Women's Center and at each other's houses.

Another thing that helped us along was humor. The tapes are generously punctuated by laughter, much of it in response to the ironies and paradoxes of being who we are. Writing of the humor I feel frustration at trying to convey what the experience of these dialogues was actually like. They were sometimes upsetting or depressing but they were also often a lot of fun. Another problem is that in changing spoken language into written language much is lost– intonation, rhythm, timing, gestures and facial expressions.

Three of us worked on producing typed transcripts of the tapes, work which was extremely tedious and time-consuming. While transcribing we began to identify themes which we felt were important. When the transcripts were completed I read them, selecting passages that I thought should be included and through this process identified the four major themes/topics around which the article is organized. These topics are 1) Feminism and relationships between Black and Jewish women, 2) Friendships between Jewish and Black women, 3) Being Lesbians in our cultures, and 4) Similarities and differences between Black and Jewish women.

An effort has been made to preserve the dialogue form while structuring the article thematically. Making words that were originally spoken readable has involved editing out some of them and adding others with the purpose of making the article as clear as possible.

The participants were Eleanor Johnson, Judith Stein, Mary Nelson, Priscilla Golding and Beverly Smith.

We have identified ourselves as follows:

Eleanor (Elli): I was born in '50 to a Black working class family in Roselle, New Jersey. I was raised by/lived with my mother, father and maternal grandmother along with two brothers and three sisters.

Judith: I am a 28 year old Jewish woman from a lower middle class family. I grew up in a small city in Indiana which had a very small Jewish population.

Mary: The middle daughter of a retired soldier and working R.N. mother, I was 24 at the time of the discussions. I've been told that my home in Hartford, Connecticut is in a Black middle class neighborhood.

Priscilla: I am a second-generation Bostonian from a working class Jewish family. I am 30 years old.

Beverly: I am a 33 year old Black woman. I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio in a family which included my twin sister, Barbara, my mother, grandmother, aunt and great aunts.

Several months have passed since we submitted the initial draft of this article to *Conditions.* During this time, some of us decided that there was more to say about the process of our working together and about the resulting article than what appeared in the original manuscript. The comments below are individual women's additions.

Judith: At each of our four meetings we experienced very different levels of energy, intensity and emotional depth. However, we were extremely non-confrontive with each other. For me, the fact that I didn't know all the women and had little basis for trust, and my own apprehension about our topic, meant that I was reluctant to confront other women, or to insist that we push harder to talk about subjects even more intense or painful than those that we had already addressed.

Although we did discuss some assumptions about how to work together, we never made a decision as a group about exactly what we wanted to accomplish in these discussions, or about what level of anger or confrontation was OK. The result was that we treaded very lightly around explosive subjects, and shared our experiences as Black or Jewish Lesbians without really tackling the issues of conflict between Blacks and Jews. This sharing of experiences was often very deep and powerful; much of this depth is lost in the translation from tape to print.

A serious omission in our discussions and in this article is any discussion of Jewish racism and Black anti-semitism. I think that the dynamics within the group, the fact that we met only four times and were not an on-going group, and the pain produced by many of our

"easier" topics all contributed to our inability to tackle this topic head on. For whatever reason, our lack of discussion about our own racism or anti-semitism is a serious flaw.

I am disappointed at what this article is not; I had hoped we would create something which spoke more directly to the intersection of race and culture in our lives as Lesbian feminists. But I am also pleased at what the article contains: this is the first time I have seen this level of our perceptions of our lives as Black or Jewish women. I hope that women find the article a useful base, a starting place, and that other women use our work and build on it. I am committed to the women's movement moving forward, and that *must* include a hard look at class, race and culture. I hope this article becomes one of many efforts examining these issues.

Priscilla: When I walked into our first meeting, faced with four women, a tape recorder, and a table full of good food, my expectations in some ways exceeded the reality of the situation. In other ways, I was not able to predict the intensity and energy which would be produced during our four meetings. I, along with other women, had thought that we would cover all aspects of Black/Jewish relationships; political and personal, local and international; share relevant anecdotes from our past and commiserate over family joys and estrangements. What we did share was a lot of emotions about our pasts and our hopes for the future. What we have shared with the reader are excerpts which hopefully will give an indication of our interactions and inspire more women to document their own dialogues so we may all share their joys and their wisdom.

Elli: As a Black woman, not to mention being Lesbian feminist, I have been concerned about how my process comes across in the dialogue which follows. To expose myself emotionally to white women is to leap over many boundaries—some of which are manageable (possible Lesbian connections), while others seem nearly impossible (the subtleties of racism). My inclination is to proceed under the notion that the other Black participants are responding to the emotional exposure as a unified voice. In response to my Black feminist consciousness I am aware of having to let go (at times unwillingly) of the safety valve of assumptions. What follows is how I dealt with that realization.

From the beginning, we knew that we wanted to explore what it means for us to be Lesbians. When we talked at the end of our first meeting about topics we wanted to cover in future discussions Elli said, "I was thinking about what it means for us to be Lesbians in our particular cultures. 'Cause I know for me one of the things that I'm struggling with is trying to reach back and preserve some stuff that I think is real essential to me as a Black woman and to try to sift out the stuff that's oppressive to me. But I'm sort of reconnecting to my family as an adult Black Lesbian feminist. So that's real scary but I would like to try to talk about that in some way." Judith expressed a similar perception about her position as a Jewish Lesbian–"I feel like it's a struggle for me to learn to live as a Lesbian feminist and to live Jewishly at the same time."

For us, being Lesbians is not our only subcultural identity. As Jewish and Black women we have both wanted and needed to identify with our own ethnic and racial groups. As Black and Jewish Lesbians we are faced with the task of trying to reconcile these two strongly felt identities. In our discussions we talked about our fears of being rejected by our families and communities because we're Lesbians. We also tried to resolve our criticisms of the heterosexual family with our knowledge that it was that same heterosexual family which enabled our peoples to survive. These discussions were some of the most painful we had, but they also made us feel very close to each other. We realized that we are all "between a rock and a hard place."

We began our discussion of this topic at our second meeting.

Beverly: What does it mean to be Lesbians in our cultures? *(Melodramatic laughter.)* I'm glad I'm on the couch.

(Giggles.)

Mary: What does that mean?

Priscilla: Yeah, what does that mean?

Beverly: Oh, what I meant is that I don't think that Lesbians are well-loved in our communities. That's what I *mean.* Let me put this idea out. Something I have felt, and I know I've talked about it with Elli, because it seems to me to be such an important part of being a Black Lesbian is the fear of or the reality of rejection by Black people because we're Lesbians just seems like one of the most painful things in

the world. Because it's not like, to me it *couldn't* be like being a standard white Lesbian and being rejected because of homophobia, by I guess white society or the larger society, or what have you. It has very painful aspects to me. It feels awful to be part of an oppressed group and have the members of your oppressed group reject you.

Priscilla: It evokes all the feelings of never fitting in and never fitting in and never fitting in. The groups get smaller and smaller and smaller. You accept that you don't fit into the American culture in general when you start. I know I do feel that way, wanting to belong so much, and wanting in a lot of ways to be very much part of at least American Jewish culture. That's already a small group of people. And knowing that that's not true. There's some overlap, but I'm never going to fit in there. I mean I'm not going to change, and the way I am now, I'm not going to fit in. But it's definitely something that does bother me. I think that has a lot to do with my maturing and feeling closer to certain people. And I do feel very close to Jewish people in general, even straight Jewish people, because there is some kind of family feeling at this point. I do feel that a Jewish person is more family to me, and around Boston they usually are. *(Laughter.)* There's a small amount of Jewish people here and you are related. And if you go a couple of cousins away you can find people that are always related. So that's it—it's like having a family reject you and that's what it is. It's like knowing the family would not accept me because I'm not out as a Lesbian in most places, especially within a lot of Jewish places. I mean I just go my way. And there *are* a lot of women that aren't married now. I mean in my generation I can do that. Before I couldn't, but now it's acceptable... it's frowned on in some places, but it's acceptable. There are women that have gone to college and that have careers. They think I have a career.

(Laughter.)

Judith: We know it's just a job.

Priscilla: I mean it's a cover.

Beverly: I've got to say this. I'm not out to the slim remnants of my family. We're talking about three or four people basically who are not primary relatives or anything, but I'm hoping that if they ever think about it that they will remember that phrase "career girl" and say, "Ah yes, she must be a career girl. . . ." I really think of that as a cover. . . .

Priscilla: That's my cover. That's why it was good I finally got a job... It wasn't working out too well.

(Laughter.)

Beverly: You can't be unemployed and be a career woman. Doesn't look good.

Priscilla: But that's what it is, it's a cover. I mean if I was walking around and saying, "Hi, I'm a Jewish Lesbian," it wouldn't work out. But as long as I don't have to confront, and that's where I am, I don't have to. It's not a day-to-day issue. They don't come to me and say, "Why aren't you married and having children? Where is your man?" It doesn't happen because there are covers, and as long as everyone on both sides is comfortable, then superficially everything is fine. That's the way it is with most people, that is my family and most people in Jewish culture. I think that's where a lot of Jewish Lesbians are. Those are some of the ways you can just live out your life. As long as you don't make a big confrontation, you can not be married, you can do that now. I don't think you could have done that fifteen years ago. It's like being in limbo.

Beverly: I have gotten the impression that Jewish culture has had a huge amount of emphasis on marriage and on marrying the right people too.

Priscilla: Well, when you're only a couple million, it's a reality, I mean it is something that is real hard to deal with, not having Jewish children bothers me a lot–I want there to be Jews in another generation, but the way things go, and the types of Jews that I want, I'd like to see all the Jewish Lesbians I know have children because of the types of things that we have to pass on. That's something I share with the straight Jewish community–I share that with them. I'd like to have a child but I haven't been able to work that out... and maybe things could improve, maybe it could work out. As of now, it doesn't look possible.

Judith: I feel a heavy weight, about the responsibility as Jewish women to have Jewish children, and then particularly as Jewish Lesbians and feminists to have children that are raised in some way other than the standard heterosexual values. And it's not at all far removed that the literal survival of the people depends on numbers, the numbers of people who will identify as Jewish. Nobody in my family ever talks about the Holocaust, talks about numbers, or talks about survival, so it's much more coming from places other than my immediate biological

family. But I'm very aware of the issue around survival, and I think that for me, the stuff about being a Lesbian and being a Jewish Lesbian is "How will we survive?" And I believe it, I believe without any doubts that that is how we made it through—every place we ever got thrown out of, everything that was done to us—was that the bloodlines of the family were very strong, and the extended family. There's these whole traditions of family networks called *landsmen* which is Yiddish, people who are from the same *shtetl* and town. . . .

I understand that what I am about is not supporting the survival of the traditional family and that's a very big conflict for me. I mean, as a Lesbian, my survival depends on that structure changing, and my political values depend on that structure changing, but as a Jewish woman, I know that's how I got here in a very literal sense. The family held together, not because they liked each other, not even because there was necessarily a great deal of genuine caring, but because they were family and there was an obligation.

And so I get really torn apart, because part of the reason why I think my mother, who's fairly sophisticated in some ways, is so threatened by my Lesbianism, is that she understands that I am not about maintaining the family. It's a real major conflict for me, and I can deal with it by making jokes, but you know, I carry five thousand years of history on my back. And I feel like I am running smack up against it when I say I don't want this family structure to continue. And then I can turn around and say, "But that's how we got here." So to me it's real serious, this thing about making Jewish babies.

(Long silence.)

Elli: I think that must be some of what I hear as a Black Lesbian—that it is against the family, or it's against the nation.

Beverly: One of the things some Black people feel is that being a Lesbian is being white. Someone told me that a Black woman doctor said Lesbianism is something you "catch" from white women. A doctor!!

It is painful to think that you are doing something that could even be construed, whether you believe it or not, as going against your people.

Judith: In religious Jewish families, there are the traditional burial rites. One of them is sitting *shiva.* It is a kind of ritual mourning and in religious families they do that if you marry a gentile. But I know a num-

ber of people whose families sat *shiva* for them when they came out. I mean marked them as dead. The child becomes dead, I mean they cease to exist.

Elli: I think the other thing, at least the stuff that I get from Black women who are heterosexual, is the whole thing about protecting the image of the Black man. He's been so downtrodden, beaten and oppressed—even more so than the Black woman, how could you as a Black Lesbian, take yet something else from this Black man, which would be his woman, it's like trying to be a man.

(Long silence.)

Judith: When I first moved to Boston, I used to go to Coolidge Corner, to someplace that was Jewish. I used to go out, and I would flip out thinking, "If people knew I was queer, who would be there for me?" I mean I always knew that I was masquerading there. I feel like that when I go to straight Jewish events.

When I'm at something in the women's community or a Lesbian event, I feel limits on how much I would want to count on women there. Even in the heart of Lesbian nation, I don't fit. As a white woman, I can have all the illusions taught to me that I'm going to be able to fit, if I just do it right somehow. It isn't that it's so shocking, but I do keep running into the feeling of not fitting at Lesbian events, and I feel it in Jewish things too. I'm very aware, not just of being a Lesbian, but what that says about my values.

Beverly: As we say, "between a rock and a hard place."

At our third meeting we continued talking about our conflicting commitments to our cultures and to Lesbian feminist politics.

Elli: I think that the part where we got real bummed out before was when we were talking about families. Our trying to find our niche in our own families or in our communities. And just what some of the rationale is for keeping us out. We were trying to struggle to find a place to be in and talking about the ways we still felt in or wanted to be in as a viable part of the family. But then we could see, at least for Black families, we could see reasons for them wanting to keep us out and I think that's where we got stuck. I think that with Jewish families it was the same thing. Particularly in the name of Black

nationalism or something like that—the need to keep the family lines alive and going. And being a Lesbian—is that a contradiction to all that stuff? It's like a dead end street. Where do you go after that?

Beverly: I think where you go is into political action and into asserting your right to be. That, yes indeed I am Black and I'm a Lesbian. I have always been Black, I was born Black I am going to die Black, as my grandmother told me. . . . I do think that political activism, and I include also developing theory, is one of the things that we can do. It's just so ironic, 'cause we were all born into our own cultures and ethnicities. We were all raised as Black or Jewish women, there is no doubt about that. And yet you become a Lesbian, all of a sudden you're not seen as legitimate.

Judith: I don't have any way to touch it, that weight of history. I could push my way into the community, that's where activism could take place. But I don't believe that the nuclear family is a good situation, and I do know that's how we survived. And so I have those two things and it just feels like I don't know any way out of that one. I just feel like those two things keep running in head on against each other. The kinds of things that ensured survival had to do especially with women being the ones who kept the family together. And I don't know how activism touches that. It just feels like that history is sort of around my neck. And it's different than getting included in the community 'cause even included in the community I'm not going to have the kind of family that I'm talking about.

Beverly: I still think, Judith, that there is a way of taking apart some of those concepts or realities, historical facts that you're talking about. If you can kind of pull apart what is there then you can figure out a way of putting things back together in a new way. Now it's true that the nuclear family was a unit that allowed, and in our case the extended family, but let's say the heterosexual family which I think is more to the point, was something that allowed both of our groups to survive. One of the things we could look at is how much was heterosexuality a necessary part of it. I don't think the idea of family is necessarily a negative idea either. There are some valuable concepts embodied in the family and particularly in our families, that is, families that are units in oppressed groups. But to recognize that the family is good and that's how we stayed on this earth as identifiable peoples doesn't mean that we have to take it all. That we can try and look at it in a critical manner and say, "You know this is great and this is bullshit and we don't

need it." We can have families of some kind, families/communities where the submission of certain members is not necessary for the ongoing functioning.

We discussed relationships we had with women of the other group, sensing that we were sharing parts of our lives which had both personal and political significance. There is no adequate way to summarize these stories which encompass a range of experiences, some positive, some negative, some neutral, some baffling. The excerpts which follow were selected because they suggest what is possible between us.

Elli: All the Jewish kids who were in my classes were very smart. But they were also very sensitive to me, which is something that I remember distinctly. I remember names, Howard Kipnis. . . . Just all these different names pop up, you know.

And this young woman Minnie, we were in sixth grade, we were both cheerleaders. We had developed this school team and then of course we had to have cheerleaders for the team. And she and I were safety patrols together. So when everybody else had to go into class we'd be out there practicing our cheers. And I was so in love with this woman, I swear. She was wonderful. But the thing was after school we never mixed. She went to her neighborhood. I went to my neighborhood. She never came to my house. I never went to her house. And we never talked about that. It was just understood. And it was always that way with kids in the class. . . .

By the time I got out of elementary school there may have been maybe a few of the same Jewish families that I knew in elementary school. There were a couple of kids who I remember throughout high school who were very smart and became more and more isolated. They were still ridiculed. And I don't think there were any anti-Jewish slurs but just the fact that they were very quiet and very smart and they were very different. They would be out of school and nobody would talk about the Jewish holidays. It wasn't something that was out in the open. Although I had Jewish teachers it still wasn't talked about that some days they would be out. There were these differences that were not talked about.

And I think that the racial tension was there from day one for

me. So that I think the Jewish kids sort of got lost in the shuffle. That it was just white and Black. And I think some of the feelings that I had were wanting to have these friendships but somehow having to cross over all of these barriers to have it happen. So that it just never happened. And I never took the risk to have it happen. . . .

Some of these relationships, I was too young to understand what was going on. To be able to formulate the questions that were in my head. As a kid I walked around with so many questions anyway that nobody ever answered. But that was one of the big ones.

And I still think about some of those kids now. Where are they? That slowly, they moved away. And that wasn't talked about. And I know that there was a lot of feeling there. There were times when this one woman, Minnie and I, we would begin to talk about stuff, but somehow the words weren't there. We'd go on to talk about something else. I just remember a lot of pain and a lot of unspoken stuff, just a lot of unspoken feelings. And I know that there was some allegiance there between particular Jewish kids and Black kids. But the whole thing about loyalties just overrode that whole thing.

In a later discussion Elli analyzed a difficult yet fulfilling relationship with a Jewish woman.

Mary: I think that maybe in the back of my mind I was thinking that I can't give this woman all of myself because she was white. And I thought I should save part of myself for Black women. I would give her up to a point where we got to and then she had her own set of demands.

Elli: I think that's a real crucial issue. Mary just talked about feeling like she couldn't share all of herself to this Jewish woman. . . . And that reminds me of some of my interactions with Jewish women. . . .

I don't think I had any real relationships with Jewish women until I came to Boston, outside of the elementary school experience that I talked about before. But in Boston there were five women I was pretty close with and one of them is Jewish. I think a lot of the critical areas in my spending time with them had to do with each of our issues around identity. I felt a lot of the time, for me to share who I am as a Black woman would somehow legitimize these other women because they felt so awful about who they were and where

they came from. So when you talked about holding part of you back, I felt that a lot. I couldn't totally share 'cause I felt like I would be ripped off. As though my identity would somehow legitimize these other women. It's almost like a leech, sort of hooking on to someone else's identity, to make you feel better about who you are. I felt that a lot. So I think I also held back and I feel a lot of these women hooked up with ethnic cultures other than their own. Each of them got into something else where they could feel better about themselves and have something that they could identify with.

This Jewish woman and I are the only two out of that group who have really come to terms with each other as who we are. And it's taken almost four years to do that and we're just beginning to sort of have a dialogue and a real relationship between me as a Black woman and her as a Jewish woman. And it's still real painful. Because in this country we're both dumped on. As Lesbians we're both dumped on. With all the stuff going on internationally it's just real hard for us both to hear each other and to respect what the other one has to say and remain friends. It's a real big task. And I think it was real threatening for her feeling so shaky about being a Jewish Lesbian.

But it was always real threatening for her, for me to start talking about what it meant for me to be Black and connecting with Black women and struggling with my family. It was as if, "Well, if you're really into being Black does that mean that you won't be able to hear what it means for me to be Jewish?" It's like that always seems to be mutually exclusive. My Blackness was always a threat to her. And I don't know if I ever understood that. I think that that's a real common thing with white women anyway. As if somehow you have to keep a part of you under wraps. Otherwise it's too overwhelming or too threatening or too something. But that was real striking with her since she was dealing with, "Is it OK for me to be Jewish?" herself.

Judith: Were you aware in this group of women who were white-skinned that this woman was Jewish? Is that an awareness you had?

Elli: Oh yeah. What struck me about it, this is real interesting, is I think what originally attracted me to her is that she felt more real to me. She's a darker-skinned Jewish woman, she had black hair and brown eyes. I mean I was drawn to her more so than the other women. And that's a real painful area for her always being the dark one, in her family and her community. So for me to get drawn to her for stuff that's real painful for her in the white mainstream. It was al-

ready a set up for the two of us. And I think that I was protecting myself too. I always felt that I couldn't be totally there with her as a Black woman, because it was so painful for her. That always comes up for me if I am going to be totally myself as a Black woman with a Jewish woman, that painful stuff always comes up around identity.

I would say that is probably the most real relationship I have with a white woman in Boston. She is probably one of the few women who has taken her ethnicity seriously. There's some good stuff there, but there's a lot of painful stuff there too for both of us. And we're still struggling with it.

Judith: Part of why I asked whether Elli knew her friend was Jewish is that especially recently I've been trying to figure out why I don't feel like white people. I don't feel like I'm white people. But I know I have white skin and I walk down the street and I'm white people. But I have this sort of contradiction that goes on all the time. And sometimes I talk about feeling dark in situations even though I am fair-skinned and light-eyed. And that to me is that I'm not like other white people.

Elli: She used to talk about that too, about being dark, and that used to make me angry. I'd say, "What do you mean, dark? You know you're not dark, you're white. I'm dark."

Priscilla: When you walk into a white room. When I was at the Harvard Club and all the people there were *white.* All of a sudden you see the difference. I always felt dark but I felt good about it.

Judith: I don't know, because to me it's important to maintain that distinction to try and find some kind of ground of owning having white skin and I get a lot of stuff for that because of being white. But also, that I'm not white people, not like regular Christian white people. And I don't know if that's a difference that any of you experience. It is part of how I see the world anyway. That's why I was asking you if you were aware of her being Jewish. And when you say you were drawn to her, that doesn't surprise me at all.

Elli: It was that darkness, it's true.

Judith movingly described the development of her first friendship with a woman of color.

world and you're still considered a nigger. You don't have that kind of buying power. So I guess I have an appreciation for your explanation of the difference, that it is clearly an oppression, but in this country it is not on the same scale. The texture is real different. It functions for different reasons.

Beverly: There's been a lot of paralleling of stuff in our other meetings. But I'm not quite sure whether we've reached points of identity. I'm not sure whether we've answered a basic question—is what we have to contend with the same for Black and Jewish women? What are the similarities and what are the differences? . . . .

One of the things it raised for me is that when I read it,* it's true that my experience of who Jewish people are in this country and what their power position is, is that indeed, they are not like Black people. They don't have the same relationship to that. And that's what I want to bring up here.

Priscilla: I think that's the key. A lot of the differences is that you're white-skinned and there are certain things that Jews can do, and it's only because they're white-skinned, that they're allowed to do things. There're a lot of places that you can get jobs because you are white-skinned. It doesn't mean that you are tolerated. But you can get things economically, you can get your paycheck. You can go to a lot of places and it's because you're white-skinned.

And a lot of the oppression that's there does not necessarily hit in the area of economics. It hits in the isolation. It hits in a lot of different places that are not necessarily economic. I think that's why American Jews in this generation, and it's a very short period of time in Jewish history, have been able to get decent jobs and to have all the material pleasures that America has offered. Jews have been able to do that because they're a white-skinned minority. And they can be tolerated in a lot of places that people of color are not.

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*At the beginning of this discussion we talked about excerpts from the article "Culture, Feminist Racism and Feminist Classism: Blaming the Victim" by Hope Landrine. *Off Our Backs,* Special Issue on Racism and Sexism, November, 1979, pp. 2-3.

Judith: The oppression of Jewish people in this country at this time is not on the level of physical survival. And I think that the oppression of people of color is absolutely down to the level of physical survival. And those are the kinds of things that are listed in that article—things having to do with physical survival, around food, around heat, around drug addiction, or any of those things, any thing, just being able to live. And I don't think that the oppression of Jewish people in this country, except for maybe in the beginning part of the big migration from Eastern Europe, has ever been quite so seriously on the level of physical survival as the oppression of people of color in this country.

But the conclusion that I feel like some people make, and it just seems really inaccurate, is that there is no oppression, *or* it is not real and serious, *or* that it's a thing of the past, *or* that it's a figment of the imagination of Jewish women who want to sort of be cool and identify as oppressed. And that's where I start just getting enraged.

But I don't see it on a survival level. So I don't see it as the same. And I think that I've had to watch for that in myself—as a real danger to sort of falsely identify. It's just real clear to me that my physical survival has not been on the line in my life. That to me is some of the difference. And it is clearly a lot less serious whether or not you can go to Harvard or you can go to the state college than whether or not you are going to be able to pay the rent or get thrown out on the street. But I don't feel like one is real and the other is false.

Priscilla: I think that's the issue. They're different. And there's some people who don't want to acknowledge the existence of Jewish oppression. And that's what I find a lot happening in the feminist community. There's been lots of letters, oppression against oppression, which one's better. And things are different, people are different, groups are different. But it doesn't negate one or the other.

Beverly: Well there's one thing I've got to say which I feel is very difficult for me to say. I'm just thinking about my experiences in childhood and growing up. According to some sorts of American myths or whatever I heard growing up, Jews were members of a minority group, of course they wouldn't use the word oppressed, and Black people were too. And I always knew that we were just so many light years away from the position of Jews. And it made me angry. It made me furious. And I felt, like how is it that they get to be members of a minority group but they seem like they're doing all right. And we

have nothing. And so I just wanted to state that. From the position I was in as a Black child growing up, this was something that was very apparent to me.

Judith: Both by concerned feminists and certainly by the mainstream Jewish community, I have seen Jewishness be used in a really vile way to mask privilege that comes from being white-skinned. What I grew up with, in particular, and I think it was real typical for the child of American-born parents who were moving into the middle class—was that we understood "prejudice" because we had experienced it and we wouldn't be that way with Black people. And that was it. So I grew up with the assumption that of course I wouldn't be prejudiced 'cause I knew what it was about, from being Jewish. And that was despite real blatant lies to that. Because I also grew up hearing about the *schwartzes* which is Yiddish for Black, and it's not a complimentary term. In my family, you would never say nigger, but you might say *schwartze* if you wanted to.[4]

That's been a real thing to work against. There's some way of paying attention to the fact that despite prejudice and very real, very vile stuff that I experienced as a child, it's not the same. And somehow, I grew up with the attitude that it's almost tit for tat.

I feel like Jewishness gets to be this sort of seesaw. Sometimes it's up and sometimes it's down. And that's true in the feminist community too. Among Jewish feminists. Sometimes it's up—and I myself have been in the position of being a white-skinned Jewish feminist, denying that I have work to do around racism because I'm Jewish and so I understand it better, certainly better than any other white women. I think that even at my worst I did not presume to understand it better than a woman of color. But I had a whole load of arrogance that I pulled off my Jewishness. And that's not something I'm proud of at all. I feel like I've got to go back now and undo that.

And then the other side of that is women saying, "[Being Jewish] doesn't make any difference, you're just like me." And me knowing that's not true. So I think the potential for white-skinned Jewish women to use Jewishness as a way of evading dealing with their own skin privilege is real—I mean I've seen it and I've done it and I believe it's real possible. But even given that potential, I've seen as a response to that non-Jewish white women saying, "Well, it really doesn't make any difference, you're still white." And it feels like neither one of those

things are really the whole truth. *(Pause.)* It makes me nervous to put that on tape, you know. It *does.* 'Cause I've got bad deeds, right. Sort of the worst aspects of trying to be a Jewish feminist.

Elli: I guess to me what you've said feels like the essence of what I have been thinking about in terms of our whole process. And the anger that Beverly was talking about. Like there're all these similarities, but yet when it comes down to it, to the outside world, people will *always* know that I'm Black and people may *never* know that you're Jewish. And I think that's where Black people get real impatient and just sort of want to push you aside, like "Look!" 'Cause you don't *have* to deal and I guess as feminists we can choose to deal or choose not to deal depending on how backed into a corner you get. Or how principled you are. But that's a choice that you have, and that's not a choice Black women have.

Judith: It hasn't always been a choice for Jews. It is a choice for me and probably will be my whole life.

Priscilla: I think that's why Jewish women react in different ways. Jewish women who have identity, who identify with Jewish people and Jewish history have a very different perspective than women who know they're Jewish but operate in their lives only as feminists. But if you're really tied to the history you can't disregard it, even though right this minute walking down the street someone doesn't see thousands of years of oppression. But it's inside me.

Afterword

Writing this Afterword I am thinking of what's included in this article and I'm also very aware of some things which are not. The article itself contains only a fraction of all we said and experienced. And of course we have not nearly exhausted any of the subjects we approached.

I feel it's important to point out that we did not deal directly, in detail, with the issues of Jewish racism and Black anti-semitism in this country. Perhaps because the things we did talk about sometimes produced so much pain for us we were reluctant to take this on. It's also possible that this topic could be handled better by women who had longer herstories of being together (e.g., an ongoing discussion group of Black and Jewish women) or by separate groups of Jewish or Black women.

A characteristic of our approach to all the issues we discussed was our refusal to passively accept the "truths" we've been handed about them. Our commitment to look instead at these issues in all their complexity constitutes the essence of a radical, feminist politic.

We were quite conscious of the significance of this undertaking from the beginning. In our first meeting Judith said, "But none of the things I've read about Black and Jewish relations are by feminists. None of this is by women. So here we are, talk about groundbreaking, and that makes it real scary. Because in some ways I would like to do something that other women can build on, can use and build on."

We feel that this article is something valuable which other women can use as a basis for their own discussions and that other women can take our work and go farther.

At the end of our last meeting, Mary talked about the importance of what we had accomplished. "Just the fact that the five of us have gotten together to talk about Jewish and Black relationships is going to mean that each time we leave and we talk to someone who's either Black or Jewish, we're going to say, 'I was in this group and we talked about this.' And it's going to change our perspective and it'll just get more people thinking about it. It's a long process and we might not have the time to see it to fruition. But at least it's begun."

NOTES

[1] The title is taken from the last line of Adrienne Rich's classic essay, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying." Motheroot Publications, 214 Dewey Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15218. c. 1977. Also available in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, by Adrienne Rich, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1979.

[2] See Judy Simmons' poem "Minority" in *Conditions: Five—The Black Women's Issue* (1979), pp. 93-94. Following that poem was an "Editor's note" by Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith, guest editors of that issue, commenting on the process involved in their decision to publish "Minority."

[3] Priscilla's comment during this discussion that "Jewish culture *is* food," echoes Harriet Malinowitz's superb short story, "Coffee and Cake" which appeared in *Conditions: Six* (1980). The character re-

calls sitting *shiva* for her father and how visitors brought her family quantities of baked goods. "I only remember loving those cakes for being so inordinately civilized; for being so attractive; for being so expensive. Within those boxes with their script saying 'Ida's' or 'Mitzi's' or 'Ratner's,' I sensed my culture" (74).

[4] Elly Bulkin has analyzed the use of the term *schwartzes* in her family in the following way: "Asked to recall my earliest awareness that there were differences between people of color and white people, I remembered two instances which symbolize for me some of the complexity of transcending my own racism to take clearly anti-racist positions. I recall my immigrant grandmother, who died before I was 6, referring to Black people as 'schwartzes,' dropping a word of Yiddish into a stream of English sentences and thereby impressing on me without further explanation that 'they' (and, by extension, other people of color) were so alien to my white world that their very existence could not be acknowledged in my own language" (5). This passage is from Bulkin's extremely important essay, "Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics," *Sinister Wisdom 13,* Spring 1980, pp. 3-22.

CHILDHOOD

I could hardly wait to get out. I remember it. I was always being held. I was all alone. I was being eaten by a hairy mouth. I sat. Suddenly I stood up and I walked. My first sentence was a perfect sentence. Nuns rushed in the halls. Mother wore a silk bedjacket. The nipple was rubber. May I have a drink of water please. I wet my bed. Mother took me behind the mirrored door so her glasses glistened. Don't you ever do it again. Why did you murder Daddy, why did you do it? I walked into the bathroom in my sleep. Coming after me thousands of them. We went back to the orange ranch. Pancho bit me on the nose. Mr. Birch cut me an orange, round and round it peeled off leaving a handle. The airplane crashed in the orange grove during the war and the government paid us back. I smeared poo-poo over the walls and turned the pictures upsidedown. I was standing in my crib. I was standing at the window with my sister in my arms almost throwing her out. I was in the department store all alone. The pillars were spiralling candycanes with a man's voice that haunted my name. The room throbbed with it. Shadows were moving over the ceiling, avocado trees and snakes waiting to bite off my feet. The shower-door slammed shut during the earthquake. I was walking across the street holding my father's hand. We stepped out of the blue Lincoln into the windy street. Palm trees, looking both ways. She came home from the hospital in her coral robe, smiling red lips. I was sitting in the back seat of the car. She leaned over and kissed me. We were hugging in her white dress in the living room, twirling. I was running up and down the cement steps of the backyard. We were building pyramids, we were building forts, we were playing in the sandbox. Lemons, oranges, peaches, apricots, kumquats, loquats, magnolias, roses and pomegranates. We were wearing our blue chiffon dresses: Deena's with a round neck, mine with a vee. To make me look thinner. Deena's bedroom was painted blue to make her relax. The bed-wetting machine rang when she wet. Mother was washing our hair in the kitchen sink. I was lying on the counter. Deena was getting her scalp massaged. Mother was braiding my hair pulling the little hairs tighter into the fat brown braids. She was brushing. We were sitting

at the kitchen table. Deena was spooning peas into the coral curved booth. I was looking out the window. You have a beautiful view of the city. I was sitting on the roof listening to my cousin's jazz records. At his funeral I looked in: waxy white Roger. I said funerals are barbaric, I'm never going again. Mary Martha Hart's belly blew up like a balloon in her foamy nightgown. Her casket was closed. I saw them standing at the bottom of the stairs. Everyone else was asleep. Mother was panting get me a drink. Daddy was laughing, hair thick and wavy. Mother's nightgown was in a heap by the bed in the morning. I asked why. Mother was saying I want a divorce. Mother was saying she got hot during the night and took it off. When she died there were no more piano lessons. She said if you ever get cold you can put your hands between your legs like this. Her large brown thighs. Her long brown breasts with big dark circles. Marks on her hips. The pasty beige cover slapped on. The black mascara coated on and on. The careful lined full red lips. Kisses for us on toilet paper. Lots when she went out. Her bright aqua lowcut dress glaring on the hanger. My olive green velvet pants in the lowest drawer.

The matching top with inset bodice. The beautiful white and red patterned tucks on the dress Mother sewed the night I was blackballed. Laughing in their cars the night the girls came to get Maureen. The boys swiping hubcaps across the street. My nose pressed against the windowscreen. My file on sex on the back shelf. On my dressing table the tall-eared cactus Daddy gave Mother when they met. Mother bending over her cacti downstairs on the backporch. Mother waiting for Daddy to come home from work. The dark cooks with their greasy bags of frenchfries. Call your father and find out when he's coming home from work. Laughing with mother, the latelate show, candy from the little market. Dangling off my bed in daydream. Going downstairs to do homework. Pantomimes in the basement, I a flying angel. Mother sitting on the rose sofa sipping her coffee. Playing the piano, playing the harp. Mother stirring her coffee, Mother getting up. Sugar from the sugarbin, all over the kitchen floor. That was beautiful, could you play it again. Catherine Jackson leaning with perfume by my side. You can do anything you want. Nita's perfume and long nose. My killer serve slipping the net. Straight A's. Mr. Andelian sitting on my desk, his dog eyes, are you happy at home? Doors locked. Slammed it on her finger. Mother getting dressed at midnight. Cleaning my knick knack shelf. Mother getting undressed before the recital. Waiting on the edge of the bed. Waiting on the school steps. Are you still here? I'll be right there. Black. Oh there you are. Mother when are you going to get up. Lazy

Mary will you get up. Mother I'm going to be late. Mother I'm late. Mother I thought you didn't love me anymore. Dedication page torn out of my novel. My babyblanket, careful embroidery, unfinished. My babydoll. My furry Jocko. My own bicycle. Coming down the stairs too early Christmas morning: my breathrobbing golden ever harp. I want to be sweet. Bring me the hanger to spank you. She doesn't mean what she says. The mommy and daddy lie together and make a baby. And when she was good she was very very good and when she was bad. . . . Old Ben got so fat he couldn't get out of his chair to eat. Will Helen Trent find love and happiness at thirty-five. Soft warm breadcustard in bed sick. Will Oscar Levant have to go back into the mental hospital. And here's Perry Como. Wither thou goest I will go. Beeny and Cecil the Seasick Seaserpent. Jane Eyre, Nancy Drew, all the Bronte sisters. Mommy just one more song. I was writing my thoughts on scraps of paper sticking them in the drawer in the dark. Maple furniture, colonial houses, stone and wood. In the Rockies far-away. . . I was taking the bus to the downtown library to study "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock." I was walking down Hollywood Boulevard into Pickwick Books, the record stores. I was watching Madame Bovary in the small dark theatre, their legs touching under the table. I was running away, down the block past the MacDermotts', past the Barys', up the hill to the house with the low brick wall where I sat drying my tears, watching the clouds, the moon. I was walking home. I was wading through waist-deep floodwaters in my homemade woolen skirt. I was going away to college.

from THE GLORIA STORIES

Every child aspires to be something when he grows up. Sometimes these aspirations are totally ridiculous, but coming from the mind of a child they are forgiven and given enough time, they are forgotten. These are normal little dreams from which life draws its substance. Everyone has aspired to be something at one time or another; most of us have aspired to be *many* things. I remember wanting to be an acolyte so badly I would go around bobbing in front of every icon I came across whether they were in churches or private houses. When this aspiration was forgotten, I wanted to be a kamakazi pilot so I could nosedive into the church that never allowed girls to serve at the altar. After that I made a big transition. I wanted to be a nurse, then a doctor, then a burlesque dancer, and finally I chose to be a schoolteacher. Everything else was soon forgiven and forgotten.

My friend Gloria, however, never went beyond aspiring to be one thing, and one thing only. She wanted to be a man. Long after I had left for college to learn the intricacies of being an educator, my youngest sister would write to me long frightening letters in which she would say that she had seen Gloria barreling down the street in an old Plymouth honking at all the girls walking down the street. One letter said that she had spotted her in the darkness of a theater making out with another girl. Another letter said that she had seen Gloria coming out of a cantina with her arms hooked around two whores. But the most disturbing one was the one when she said that she had seen Gloria at a 7-11 store, with a butch haircut and what appeared to be dark powder on the sides of her face to imitate a beard.

I quickly sat down and wrote her a letter expressing my concern and questioning her sanity. A week later I received a fat letter from her.

It read:

Dear Rocky,

Here I am, taking my pencil in my hand to say hello and hoping that you are in the best of health, both physically and mentally. As

for me, I am fine, thanks to Almighty God.

The weather in the Valley is the shits. As you have probably read or heard on the radio we had a hurricane named Camille, a real killer that left many people homeless. Our house is still standing, but the Valley looks like Venice without gondolas. As a result of the flooded streets, I can't go anywhere. My poor car is under water. But that's all right. I think the good Lord sent us a killer storm so that I would sit home and think seriously about my life, which I have been doing for the last three days.

You are right, my most dearest friend, I am not getting any younger. It is time that I should start thinking about what to do with my life. Since you left for school, I have been seeing a girl named Rosita, and I have already asked her to marry me. It's not right to go around screwing without the Lord's blessings. As soon as I can drive my car I'm going to see what I can do about this.

Your sister is right, I have been going around with some whores, but now that I have met Rosita, all that is going to change. I want to be a husband worthy of her respect, and when we have children, I don't want them to think that their father was a no good drunk.

You may think that I am crazy for talking about being a father, but somewhere in a magazine I was reading about something called artificial insemination. It's quite easy.

You may think I'm crazy for talking about being a father, but seriously Rocky, I think I can. I never talked to you about anything so personal as what I'm going to say, but take it from me, it's true. Every time I do you-know-what, I come just like a man. I know you are laughing right now, but Rocky, it is God's honest truth. If you don't believe me, I'll show you someday. Anyhow it won't be long until you come home for Christmas. I'll show you and I promise you will not laugh and call me an idiot like you always do.

In the meantime since you are now close to the University library you can go and check it out for yourself. A woman can become a father if nature has given her enough come to penetrate inside a woman. I bet you didn't know that. Which goes to prove that you don't have to go to college to learn everything.

That shadow on my face that your sister saw was not charcoal or anything that I rubbed on my face to make it look like beard. It is the real thing. Women can grow beards, too, if they shave their faces every day to encourage it. I really don't give a damn if you or your sister think it looks ridiculous. I like it, and so does Rosita. She thinks I'm beginning to look a lot like Sal Mineo, do you know who he is?

Well, Rocky, I think I'll close for now. Don't be too surprised to find Rosita pregnant when you come in Christmas. I'll have a whole case of Lone Star for me and a case of Pearl for you. Til then I remain your best friend in the world.

Love, Gloria

I didn't go home that Christmas. A friend of mine and I were involved in a serious automobile accident a little before the holidays and I had to remain in the hospital. While I was in traction with almost every bone in my body shattered, one of the nurses brought me another letter from Gloria. I couldn't even open the envelope to read it, and since I thought I was on the brink of death, I didn't care at all when the nurse said she would read it to me. If this letter contained any information that would shock the nurse, it wouldn't matter anyway. Death is beautiful insofar as it brings absolution, and once you draw your last breath, every pecadillo is forgiven.

"Yes," I nodded to the matronly nurse, "you may read my letter."

The stern-looking woman found a comfortable spot at the foot of my bed and, adjusting her glasses over her enormous nose, began to read.

Dear Rocky,

Here I am taking my pencil in my hand to say hello, hoping you are in the best of health, both physically and mentally. As for me, I am fine thanks to Almighty God.

The nurse paused to look at me and smiled in a motherly way. "Oh, that sounds like a very sweet person!"

I nodded.

The weather in the Valley is the shits. It has been raining since Thanksgiving and here it is almost the end of December and it's still raining. Instead of growing a prick I think I'm going to grow a tail, like a tadpole. Ha, ha, ha!

The matronly nurse blushed a little and cleared her throat. "Graphic, isn't she?"

I nodded again.

Well, Rocky, not much news around this asshole of a town ex-

cept that Rosita and I got married. Yes, you heard right, I got married. We were married in St. Margaret's Church, but it wasn't the type of wedding you are probably imagining. Rosita did not wear white, and I did not wear a tuxedo like I would have wanted to.

The nurse's brow crinkled into two deep furrows. She picked up the envelope and turned it over to read the return address and then returned to the letter with the most confused look I have ever seen in anybody's face.

Let me explain. Since I wrote you last, I went to talk to the priest in my parish and confessed to him what I was. In the beginning he was very sympathetic and he said that no matter what I was, I was still a child of God. He encouraged me to come to mass every Sunday and even gave me a box of envelopes so that I could enclose my weekly tithe money. But then when I asked him if I could marry Rosita in his church, he practically threw me out.

The nurse shook her head slowly and pinched her face tightly. I wanted to tell her not to read anymore, but my jaws were wired so tight I couldn't emit a comprehensible sound. She mistook my effort for a moan and continued reading and getting redder and redder.

He told me that I was not only an abomination in the eyes of God, but a lunatic in the eyes of Man. Can you believe that? First I am a child of God, then when I want to do what the church commands in Her seventh sacrament, I'm an abomination. I tell you, Rocky, the older I get, the more confused I become.

But anyway, let me go on. This did not discourage me in the least. I said to myself, Gloria, don't let anybody tell you that even if you're queer, you are not a child of God. You are! And you got enough right to get married in church and have your Holy Father sanctify whatever form of love you wish to choose.

The nurse took out a small white hanky from her pocket and dabbed her forehead and upper lip.

So, as I walked home having been made to feel like a turd, or whatever it is abomination means, I came upon a brilliant idea. And here's what happened. A young man who works in the same slaughter house that I do invited me to his wedding. Rosita and I went to the religious ceremony which was held in your hometown, and we sat as close to the altar rail as we possibly could, close enough where we could hear the priest. We pretended that she and I were the bride and

groom kneeling at the rail. When the time came to repeat the marriage vows, we both did, in our minds, of course, where nobody could hear us and be shocked. We did exactly as my friend and his bride did, except kiss, but I even slipped a ring on Rosita's finger and in my mind said, "With this ring, I wed thee."

Everything was like the real thing, Rocky, except that we were not dressed for the occasion. But we both looked nice. Rosita wore a beautiful lavender dress made out of dotted swiss material. Cost me $5.98 at J.C. Penny. I didn't want to spend that much money on myself because Lord knows how long it will be until I wear a dress again. I went over to one of your sisters' house, the fat one, and asked if I could borrow a skirt. She was so happy to know that I was going to go to church and she let me go through her closet and choose anything I wanted. I chose something simple to wear. It was a black skirt with a cute little poodle on the side. She went so far as to curl my hair and make it pretty. Next time you see me, you'll agree that I do look like Sal Mineo.

The nurse folded the letter quietly and stuffed it back inside the envelope, and without a word disappeared from the room, leaving nothing behind but the echoing sound of her running footsteps.

After my release from the hospital, I went back to the Valley to recuperate from the injuries received in the accident. Gloria was very happy that I was not returning to the university for the second semester. Although I wasn't exactly in any condition to keep up with her active life, I could at least serve as a listening post in that brief period of happiness she had with Rosita.

I say brief because a few months after they got married, Rosita announced to Gloria that she was pregnant. Gloria took her to the doctor right away, and when the pregnancy was confirmed, they came barreling down the street in their brand new car to let me be the first to know the good news.

Gloria honked the horn outside and I came limping out of the house. I had not met Rosita until that day. She was a sweet-looking little person with light brown hair, and smiled a lot, a little dippy in her manner of conversing, but for Gloria, who wasn't exactly the epitome of brilliance, she was alright.

Gloria was all smiles that day. Her dark brown face was radiant with happiness. She was even smoking a cigar and holding it between

her teeth on the corner of her mouth. "Didn't I tell you in one of my letters that it could be done?" She smiled. "We're going to have a baby!"

"Oh, come on, Gloria, cut it out!" I laughed.

"You think I'm kidding?"

"I *know* you're kidding!"

She reached across Rosita who was sitting in the passenger seat of the car and grabbed my hand and laid it on Rosita's stomach. "There's the proof!"

"Oh, shit, Gloria, I don't believe you!"

Rosita turned and looked at me, but she wasn't smiling. "Why don't you believe her?" she wanted to know.

"Because it's biologically impossible. It's. . . absurd."

"Are you trying to say that it's absurd for me to have a baby?"

I shook my head. "No, that's not what I meant."

Rosita got defensive. I moved away from the car and leaned on my crutches, not knowing how to respond to this woman because I didn't even know her at all. She began trying to feed me all this garbage about woman's vaginal secretions being as potent as the ejaculations of a male and being quite capable of producing a child. I backed off immediately, letting her talk all she wanted. When she finished talking, and she thought she had fully convinced me, Gloria smiled triumphantly and asked, "What do you got to say now, Rocky?"

I shook my head slowly. "I don't know. I just don't know. Your friend is either crazy or a damn good liar. In either case, she scares the hell out of me."

"Watch your language, Rocky," Gloria snapped. "You're talking to my wife."

I apologized and made an excuse to go back into the house. But somehow Gloria knew that I had limped away with something in my mind. She went and took Rosita home, and in less than an hour, she was back again, honking outside. She had a six-pack of beer with her.

"Alright, Rocky, now that we're alone, tell me what's on your mind."

I shrugged my shoulders. "What can I tell you? You're already convinced that she's pregnant."

"She is!" Gloria explained. "Dr. Long told me so."

"Yes, but that's not what I'm trying to tell you."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"Will you wait until I go inside the house and get my biology book. There's a section in it on human reproduction that I'd like to explain to you."

"Well, alright, but you better convince me or I'll knock you off your crutches. I didn't appreciate you calling Rosita a liar."

After I explained to Gloria why it was biologically impossible that she could have impregnated Rosita, she thought for a long silent moment and drank most of the beer she had brought. When I saw a long tear streaming down her face, I wanted to use one of my crutches to hit myself. But then, I said to myself, "What are friends for if not to tell us when we're being idiots?"

Gloria turned on the engine to her car. "Okay, Rocky, git outta my car! I should've known better than come killing my ass to tell you something nice in my life. Ever since I met you, you've done nothing but screw up my life. Get out. The way I feel right now I could easily ram up one of them crutches up your skinny ass, but I'd rather go home and kill that fucking Rosa."

"Oh, Gloria, don't do that! You'll go to jail. Making babies is not the most important thing in the world. What's important is the trying. And just think how much fun that is as opposed to going to the electric chair."

"Git outta the car *now*!"

I did.

THE FREED WOMAN

her face is dissolving
loose skin hangs in flaps
on a shapeless form
she has one good eye
which looks to the left and right
afraid to miss anything
she refuses to blink

she lives in rooms without mirrors
nothing that could reflect back at her
is permitted
they tell her she is a free woman
she can move now from house to house
country to country

then why does she sit for hours
refusing to move?
why does she describe her life
by the blemishes on the walls
which surround her?

every day new messages arrive for her
explaining carefully in plain language
that she is a free woman

she answers: i will never surrender

she looks like a woman
who has experienced fire
her features are burnt away
her one good eye refuses to close
like a dragon's it remains vigilant

they tell her she is a free woman
advise her to leave the room
leave the country leave her ancient self
leave the names secreted under plaster

i will never surrender, she says.

RITE: A LIFE

1.

She could only ask
her best friends.
Best friends sank their nails
in the small of her back,
said curve your tailbone
to the ceiling;
squeezed her breasts
with whalebone,
said smile, be
like us.

2.

In the cellar, where the laundry chute drops
twisting bodies of cloth,
behind the warped door where pears marinate
and jars of hominy wait under moons of wax,
where broomscratch feathers the cindery floor
and the cool board is waist-high
she bends, sinking all her weight on the iron,
burning it into pleats of her blouse.

3.

The day her arms were stiff
and she planned a way to eat
without reaching
for a pan. And then the day
her fingers couldn't turn the can
opener far enough.
The curb got higher
and the bus step
taller. The day the bus
pulled away without her.
The day she asked for help
to read the names
on the boxes.
The day she didn't.

NOTES FOR AMERICA

Snowing in Flagstaff, Arizona, 1 A.M.
I call from the pay phone but you are not there
And I wonder what time it is in California and if
You are in bed with someone else or just
Working late. Eight hours already
On this Greyhound bus; we've passed
Through Laguna, New Mexico, where an old woman
Got off at the pueblo and her husband
Met her in the pick-up and they smiled and kissed
Lightly. I go to sleep across two seats
And a drunk gets on and then gets off and I dream
That something is hitting my head and I wake up
Hitting my head. Sunrise over the Mohave Desert,
How I love the sound of that word, Mohave:
Pale and red, a light coating of dust
On my clothes and hair. Something about this landscape
Makes me wonder: Could I survive
A nuclear holocaust? What would I eat?
Could I live if all my friends were dead?
We pass a chemical plant, a rocket testing ground.
My father always says: "I never could imagine
Where they could test an atom bomb
Until I saw New Mexico." I want you.
In Fresno, I wash my hair in the station
Which disgusts me, but I want
Clean hair for you.
And then the fruit trees begin to appear in the valley
And it is raining in California
On the little houses and the begoniavilla
And the fields of tomatoes and the white chickens

And coming down into Santa Clara an enormous rainbow
Which I take as a sign meant for me in particular
And I remember God's covenant with Noah
And coming into San Jose I see
Spray painted on the cyclone fence, the slogan:
WOMEN RELEASE YOUR UNGOVERNABLE RAGE AS POWER
WOMEN RELEASE YOUR RAGE.

SUNDAY MORNING:
EATING A HAMBURGER IN IOWA CITY

Some of the people
are fresh from church
in starched store-bought dresses,
jackets that match
the slacks and straw hats
tightly laced with resin.
They see an Indian woman
shamelessly sitting at
one of the booths
thankfully at the rear
but they leave anyway
their lips a thin line
from the barrier nearly crossed
and their eyes
are blue marbles.
Some of the people
are young, school jackets
of black and bright yellow,
tenor voices and
tight sopranos farm-fresh.
Translucent eyes
roll over me
and peg my beadwork
to my breast,
let my black hair contrast
with well-combed wet cornsilk
as it flies around me
at this early hour
like a picture frame.
They must protect themselves
as their parents have done
by walking out of this place

that has been invaded
by native forces
and they leave the jukebox
untouched. Duty
is fulfilled.
This is Sunday.
What is different
is pointed out
and discussed.
They plot ways to trap me
fooled into my snipe-hunt here.
The women come back
and stare with interest in their eyes
talking softly and comparing me
to something on their minds.

BELOVED WOMEN

It is not known if those
who warred and hunted on the plains
chanted and hexed in the hills
divined and healed in the mountains
gazed and walked beneath the seas
were Lesbians
It is never known
if any woman was a Lesbian
so who can say that
she who shivering drank
warm blood beneath wind-blown moons
slept tight to a beloved of shininghair
curled as a smile within crescent arms
followed her track deep into secret woods
dreamed other dreams
and who would record these things
perhaps all women are
Lesbian though many try
to turn knotted sinew and stubby cheek
into that ancient almostremembered scene
perhaps all know the first
beloved so well
they can shape the power
to reclaim her

The portents in the skies–
the moons forever growing and falling
away, the suns concentric orbits
daily crossing themselves like a nun–
who's to say that these are signs
of what has always been?
And perhaps the portents are better
left written only in the stars,
etched on cave-walls, rosewindows,
the perfect naves of brooding
cathedrals. Perhaps
all they signify is best left
unsaid.

Nobody knows whether those women
were Lesbians. Nobody
can say what such an event
might mean.

PAULA GUNN ALLEN

LESBIANS IN AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURES

I. Introduction

The Lesbian is to the American Indian what the Indian is to the American–invisible.[1] Among the Sioux there were women known as the "manly-hearted women" who, it seems, functioned as warriors. Whether they were Lesbians is not mentioned in references to them. Indeed, their existence was a pretty well kept secret, and little is made of it. Among the Cherokee there were women known as Beloved Women who were warriors, leaders, and influential council members. But among the Cherokee, all women had real influence in tribal matters until reorganization was necessitated by American removal attempts. It is not known, however, whether the Beloved Women were Lesbians.

In my reading about American Indians, I have never read an overt account of Lesbians, and that reading has included hundreds of books and articles.[2] The closest anyone has come, to my knowledge, is a novel by Fred Manfred entitled *The Manly-Hearted Woman,* and though its protagonist dresses as a man and rejects her feminine role, and though she marries a woman, the writer is very explicit: she and her "wife" do not share intimacies–a possibility which seems beyond the writer's ability to envision. Indeed, she eventually falls in love with a rather strange young warrior who is possessed of enormous sexual attractiveness (given him by spirit-power and a curious genetic circumstance). After the warrior's death, the Manly-Hearted Woman divorces her wife and returns to woman's garb and occupation, discarding the spirit stone which has determined her life to that point.[3]

Because there are few direct references to Lesbians or Lesbianism among American Indians that I am aware of, much of my discussion of them here is necessarily conjectural. The conjectures are based on secure knowledge of American Indian social systems and customs which I have gathered from study and from personal information on the American Indian people–of whom I am one–and on my knowledge of Lesbian culture and practice.

Certainly, the chances that aboriginal American women formed affectional alliances are enormous. There was a marked tendency among many of the tribes to encourage virginity or some version of chastity among pubescent women; this tendency was rarely found with respect to the sexual habits of married women, however, and it referred to intercourse with males. Nothing is said, to my knowledge, about sexual liaisons between women, except indirectly. It is equally likely that such relationships were practiced with social sanction, though no one is presently talking about this. The history of Native America is selective; and those matters pertaining to women that might contradict a Western patriarchist world view are carefully selected out.

Some suggestions about how things were in "time immemorial," as the old folks refer to pre-contact times, have managed to find their way into contemporary literature about American Indians. Many tribes have recorded stories concerning daughters born to spirit women who were dwelling alone on earth. These daughters then would become the mothers of entire tribes. In one such tale, first mother was "born of the dew of the leaf of the beautiful plant."[4] Such tales point to a time prior to the advent of the patriarchy. While historical and archeological evidence suggest that this time pre-dated European contact in some regions of the Western Hemisphere, the change in cultural orientation was still proceeding. The tribes became more male-oriented and more male-dominated as acculturation accelerated. As this process continued, less and less was likely to be said by American Indians about Lesbians among them. Indeed, less and less about women in any position other than that sanctioned by missionaries was likely to be recorded.

There are a number of understandings about the entire issue that will be important in my discussion of American Indian women—heterosexual or Lesbian. It is my contention and belief that those two groups were not nearly as separate as modern Lesbian and straight women are. My belief is based on my understanding of the cultures and social systems in which women lived. These societies were tribal, and tribal consciousness, with its attendant social structures, differs enormously from that of the contemporary Western world.

This difference requires new understanding of a number of concepts. The concept of family, the concept of community, the concept of women, the concept of bonding and belonging, and the concept of power were all distinctly understood in a tribal matrix;

and those concepts were/are very different from those current in modern America.

The primarily Spirit-directed nature of the American Indians must be understood before the place of women, and the place of Lesbians, will be comprehensible. Without that understanding, almost anything about American Indians will seem trivial, obscure, or infuriating. To put it simply, the tribes believed that all human and non-human activities were directly related to the Spirit world. They believed that human beings belonged in a universe that was alive, intelligent, and aware, and that all matters were as much in the province of the Spirits as of human beings.

This perception was not based on fantasy or on speculation. It did not spring from some inarticulate longing planted deep within the savage breast by some instinctive human need to understand and manipulate reality. That scholars and folklorists can believe that it did testifies to their distance from a tribal world. In fact, the American Indian people, of whatever tribe, grounded their belief in the Spirit world firmly upon their own personal, direct and communal experience. Those who are traditionals today still place the same construction on actual events. They speak directly to a Spirit being, as directly as you might speak to a lunch companion.

Because this is so, their understanding of bonding, sexual relationships, power, familial order, and community was quite different from a modern Christian's view. Included in one's family were a number of Spirit people. Among those who shared intimately in one's personal and private reality were one or more personal Spirit guides; on the advice of these guides rested many of the decisions and activities in which any person engaged.

II. Family and Community in American Indian Life

Much of modern society and culture among American Indians results from acculturation. Christianity has imposed certain imperatives on the tribes, as has the growing tendency to "mainstream" Indians through schooling, economic requirements, and local, state, and federal regulation of their lifestyles. The Iroquois, for example, changed the basic structure of their households after the American Revolution. The whiteman determined that they had defeated the Longhouse (the term denoting Iroquois tribal groupings, or the

Iroquois nation as a whole)—though they had not even fought the Iroquois. Social disorder of enormous magnitude ensued. Handsome Lake, a Seneca prophet, received a series of visions that were to help his people accommodate to the whiteman. The central relationship of mother-daughter was thus destroyed, for Handsome Lake decreed that a woman should cleave to her husband and they should share a dwelling separate from her mother's (clan) longhouse.[5]

Among American Indians, Spirit-related persons are perceived as more closely linked than blood-related persons. Understanding this primary difference between American Indian values and modern Euro-American Judeo-Christian values is critical to understanding Indian familial structures and the context in which Lesbians functioned. For American Indian people, the primary value was relationship to the Spirit world. All else was determined by the essential nature of this understanding. Spirits, gods and goddesses, metaphysical/occult forces, and the right means of relating to them, determined the tribes' every institution, every custom, every endeavor and pastime. This was not peculiar to inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere, incidentally; it was at one time the primary value of all tribal people on earth.

Relationship to the Spirit world has been of primary value to tribespeople, but not to those who have studied them. Folklorists and ethnographers have other values which permeate their work and their understandings, so that most of what they have recorded or concluded about American Indians is simply wrong. Countless examples could illustrate this basic misunderstanding, but let me share just one, culled from the work of one of the more influential anthropologists, Bronislaw Malinowski. His massive study of the Keres Pueblo Acoma presumably qualified him as an authority on mother-right society in North America. In *Sex, Culture and Myth* Malinowski wrote: "Patrilocal households are 'united households,' while 'split households' are the exclusive phenomena of matrilocal mother-right cultures."[6] While acknowledging that economic considerations alone do not determine the structure of marriage patterns, Malinowski fails to recognize marriage as a construct founded on laws derived from conversations with Spirits. The primary unit for a tribe is not, as he suggests, the household; even the term is misleading, because a tribal "household" includes a number of individuals who are clan rather than blood relatives. For non-tribal people, "household" typically means a unit composed of a father, mother, and offspring—though contemporary living arrangements often deviate from that stereotyped

conception. A tribal household might encompass assorted blood-kin, medicine society "kin," adoptees, servants, and visitors who have a clan or supernatural claim on membership although they are biologically unrelated to the rest of the household. Writing about tribal societies in Oceania, Malinowski wrote: "Throughout Oceania a network of obligations unites the members of the community and overrules the economic autonomy of the household."[7] To a tribal person, the very notion of the household's autonomy appears to be nonsensical. To exemplify his view of tribal practices, Malinowski cites the Trobriand Islanders' requirement that a man give approximately half of his produce to his sister(s) and another portion to other relatives, thus using only the remainder for "his own household" which, Malinowski concedes, is largely supported by the wife's brother(s) and other relatives. I mention this example from a tribe which is not American Indian, because Malinowski himself encourages generalization: "Economic obligations," he continues, which "cut across the closed unity of the household could be quoted from every single tribe of which we have adequate information."[8]

Malinowski and other researchers have dismissed the household as an economic unit, but have continued to perceive households from the viewpoint of the nuclear family—father, mother(s), and offspring. He remains within the accepted, biased European understanding of "household" when he states:

> The most important examples [of split-households] come from the communities organised in extreme mother-right, where husband and wife are in most matters members of different households, and their mutual economic contributions show the character of gifts rather than of mutual maintenance.[9]

The case of matrifocal-matrilocal households only seems extreme when one defines "household" in terms that do not allow for various styles of bonding. Malinowski believes that this "extreme mother-right" method of housing people is exceptional. He does concede that it results from conditions found in high-level cultures, rather than in "primitive" ones[10] – which is an extremely interesting observation. But in making it, he again relies on some assumptions that are not justified by available evidence.

If "household" signifies housing and food-provision systems, then the living arrangements of American Indians pose numerous problems, the matter of father-right versus mother-right being only

one. In fact, people were inclined to live wherever they found themselves, if living signifies where you stash your belongings, where you take your meals, and/or where you sleep. Throughout North America, men were inclined to have little personal paraphernalia, to eat wherever they were when meal-time came, and to sleep in whatever spot was convenient when they were tired. Clan, band, and medicine-society affiliations had a primary bearing on these arrangements, as did the across-the-board separation of the sexes practiced formally or informally by most tribes.

Malinowski's view assumes that households may take various forms, but that in any case they are unified to the extent that they may be spoken of as "mine" by a male who is husband to a woman and claims to be the father of her children. The "extreme" case of the "split household" occurs when a man who is identified as a woman's husband does not contribute to her economic life except by giving presents. This notion of "household" is pretty far from any held by tribal people with which I am familiar. Even among contemporary American Indians, a male who is identified as the husband of the lady of the house may not be (and often is not) the father of her children. But according to Malinowski, "The most important fact about such extreme matriarchal conditions [as among the Pueblo and several other groups cited] is that even there the principle of social legitimacy holds good; that though the father is domestically and economically almost superfluous, he is legally indispensible and the main bond of union between such matrilineal and matrilocal consorts is parenthood[sic]."[11]

Carefully examined, the foregoing observation makes no sense; even if it did, it suggests that even though fatherhood is irrelevant in the home or office, a male remains indispensible because his presence (which may be very infrequent) confers legitimacy on something. Indeed.

Analyses like those of Malinowski can only be explained by the distortive function of cultural bias. A Pueblo husband is important because husbands are important. But I have known many "husbands" who had several "wives" and could claim that a number of women (who might or might not be claimed as wives) were the mothers of their children. And this remains the case despite some two to five hundred years of Christian influence. As an old Laguna woman has said in reference to these matters in the long ago, "We were very careless about such things then."

Actually, the legitimacy of motherhood was determined by its very existence. A woman who gave birth was a mother as long as she had a living child, and the source of a household's legitimacy was its very existence. American Indians were and are very mystical, but they were and are a very practical people.

While there can be little question about the fact that most women married, perhaps several times, it is important to remember that tribal marriages bore little resemblance to Western concepts of that institution. Much that has been written about marriage as practiced among American Indians is wrong.

Among many tribes divorce was an easy matter for both women and men, and movement of individuals from one household to another was fluid and essentially unconstrained. There are many exceptions to this, for the tribes were distinct social groups; but many had patterns that did not use sexual contraint as a means of social control. Within such systems, individual action was believed to be directed by Spirits (through dreams, visions, direct encounter, or possession of power objects such as stones, shells, masks, or fetishes). In this context it is quite possible that Lesbianism was practiced rather commonly, as long as the individuals cooperated with the larger social customs. Women were generally constrained to have children, but in many tribes, child-bearing meant empowerment. It was the passport to maturity and inclusion in woman-culture. An important point is that women who did not have children because of constitutional, personal, or Spirit-directed disinclination had other ways to experience Spirit instruction and stabilization, and to exercise power.

"Family" did not mean what is usually meant by that term in the modern world. One's family might have been defined in biological terms as those to whom one was blood-kin. More often it was defined by other considerations; spiritual kinship was at least as important a factor as "blood." Membership in a certain clan related one to many people in very close ways, though the biological connection might be so distant as to be practically nonexistent. This facet of familial ordering has been much obscured by the presence of white Christian influence and its New Testament insistence that the term "family" refers to mother, father and children, and those others who are directly related to mother and father. In this construct, all persons who can point to common direct-line ancestors are in some sense related, though the individual's distance from that

ancestor will determine the "degree" of relationship to other descendants of that ancestor.

Among many American Indians, family is a matter of clan membership. If clan membership is determined by your mother, and if your father has a number of wives, you are not related to the children of his other wives unless they themselves happen to be related to your mother. So half-siblings in the white way might be unrelated in an Indian way. Or in some tribes, the children of your mother's sister might be considered siblings, while those of your father's brother would be the equivalent of cousins. These distinctions should demonstrate that the concept of *family* can mean something very different to an Indian than it does to a non-Indian.

A unified household is one in which the relationships among women and their descendants and sisters are ordered. A split household is one in which this is not the case. A community, then, is an ordering of sister-relationships which determine who can depend on whom for what. Male relationships are ordered in accordance with the maternal principle; a male's spiritual and economic placement and the attendant responsibilities are determined by his membership in the community of sisterhood. A new acquaintance in town might be asked, "Who is your mother?" The answer identifies the person and determines the ensuing relationship between the questioner and the newcomer.

Again, community in the non-Indian modern world tends to mean people who occupy a definable geographical area and/or who share a culture (life-style) or occupation. It can extend to mean people who share an important common interest—political, avocational, or spiritual. But "community" in the American Indian world can mean those who are of a similar clan and Spirit; those who are encompassed by a particular Spirit-being are members of a community. In fact, this was the meaning most often given to the concept in traditional tribal cultures. So it was not impossible that members of a community could have been a number of women who "belonged" to a given medicine society, or who were alike in that they shared consciousness of a certain Spirit.

III. Women and Power

Any discussion of the status of women in general, and of Les-

bians in particular, cannot hope for accuracy if one misunderstands women's power in tribal societies. It is clear, I think, that the ground we are here exploring is obscure: women in general have not been taken seriously by ethnographers or folklorists, and what explorations have been done have been distorted by the preconceptions foisted on us by a patriarchal world-view, in which Lesbians are said not to exist, and women are perceived as oppressed, burdened, and powerless.

In her discussion of the "universal" devaluation of women, Sherry Ortner, for example, cites the Crow, a matrilineal American Indian tribe which placed women rather highly in their culture. Ortner points to the fact that Crow women were nevertheless required to ride "inferior" horses during menstruation, and were prohibited from participating in ceremonies during their periods. She cites anthropologist Robert Lowie who reported that Crow women were forbidden to open one particular medicine bundle which "took precedence not only of other dolls but of all other Crow medicines whatsoever."[12] Ortner marshalls this and other impressive evidence to support her claim that Crow women were believed to be inferior to men. But I suspect that the vital question is not whether women have been universally devalued, but when and how and why this came about. I further suspect that this devaluation has resulted from the power which women are perceived to have, and that evidence supporting this contention is at least as massive as the evidence of our ignominy.

Ortner again cites Lowie, who wrote: "Women. . . [during menstruation] formerly rode inferior horses and evidently this loomed as a source of contamination, for they were not allowed to approach either a wounded man or men starting on a war party."[13] Ortner continues in this vein, concluding that women are devalued even among the matrilineal Crow, because menstruation is seen as "a threat to warfare, one of the most valued institutions of the tribe, one that is central to their self-definition. . . ."[14]

Ortner apparently follows Lowie in assuming that menstruation was perceived as dirty and contaminating by tribal people, and that they saw it in the same light in which it was viewed by patriarchal peoples. Thus, she concludes that the Crow prohibited women at prescribed times from certain activities because of a belief that menstruation is unclean. The truth of the matter is quite different. Tribal people view menstruation as a "medicine" of such power that it can cause the death of certain people, i.e., men on the eve of combat.

Menstruating (or any other) Crow women do not go near a particularly sacred medicine bundle, and menstruating women are not allowed among warriors getting ready for battle, or those who have been wounded, because women are perceived to be possessed of a singular power, most vital during menstruation, puberty, and pregnancy, that weakens men's powers–physical, spiritual, or magical. The Crow and other American Indians do not perceive signs of womanness as contamination; rather they view them as so powerful that other "medicines" may be cancelled by the very presence of that power.

The Oglala Holy Man John Lame Deer has commented that the Oglalas do not view menstruation, which they call *isnati* (dwelling alone), as "something unclean or to be ashamed of." Rather it was something sacred; a girl's first period was greeted by celebration. "But," he continues, "we thought that menstruation had a strange power that could bring harm under some circumstances. This power could work in some cases against the girl, in other cases against somebody else. . . ."[15]

Lois Paul has found similar notions in the context of a peasant culture. In her essay "Work and Sex in a Guatemalan Village," she discusses the power that menstruation, pregnancy and menarche are believed to possess. She notes the belief of the peasant Pedranos (in Guatemala) that menstruating women can seriously impair a man's health, or even kill him by stepping over him or putting menstrual blood in his food.[16]

Power, among tribal people, is not perceived as political or economic, though status and material possessions can and often do derive from it. Power is conceived of as being supernatural and paranormal. It is a matter of spirit, involvement, and destiny. Woman's power comes automatically, hers by virtue of her femaleness, her natural and necessary fecundity, and her personal acquaintance with blood. The Arapaho felt that dying in war and dying in childbirth were of the same level of spiritual accomplishment. In fact, there are suggestions in the literature on ritualism and tribal ceremony that warriors and male initiates into medicine societies gain their supernatural powers by imitating ritually the processes that women undergo naturally.

The power of women can only be controlled and directed by other women, who necessarily possess equal power. A woman who is older is more cognizant of what that power entails, the kinds of

destruction it can cause, and the ways in which it can be directed and used for good. Thus, adolescent women are placed under the care of older women, and are trained in manners and customs of modesty so that their powers will not result in harm to themselves or the larger community. Usually, a woman who has borne a child becomes an initiate into the mysteries of womanhood, and if she develops virtues and abilities beyond those automatically conferred on her by her nature, she becomes a medicine woman. Often, the medicine woman knows of her destiny in early childhood; such children are watched very carefully so that they will be able to develop in the way ordained for them by the Spirits. Often these children are identified by excessive "sickliness," which leads them to be more reflective than other children and which often necessitates the added vigilance of adults around them.

Eventually, these people will enter into their true profession. How and when they do so will vary tribe by tribe, but they will probably be well into their maturity before they will be able to practice. The Spirit or Spirits who teach and guide them in their medicine work will not appear for them until they have stabilized. Their health will usually improve, and their hormone-enzyme fluctuations will be regularized. Very often this stabilization will occur in the process of childbearing and nursing, and this is one reason why women usually are not fully accepted as part of the woman's community until after the birth of a first child. Maternity was a concept that went far beyond the simple biological sense of the word. It was the prepotent power, the basic right to control and distribute goods because it was the primary means of producing them. And it was the perfect sign of right spirit-human relationship. Among some modern American Indians this principle is still accepted. The Keres, for example, still recognize the Deity as female, and She is known as Thought Woman, for it is understood that the primary creative force is Thought.

As Leslie Silko of Laguna put it in opening her novel *Ceremony:*

> Ts'its'tse'nako, Thought-Woman,
> is sitting in her room
> and whatever she thinks about
> appears.

She thought of her sisters,
Nau'ts'ity'i and I'tcts'ity'i,
and together they created the Universe
this world
and the four worlds below.

Thought-Woman, the spider,
named things
and as she named them
they appeared.[17]

Women have great power that is unique to them. This power must be carefully controlled lest it upset the tribal applecart. This concept concerning the supernatural power of women has undergone changes since contact. At Zuni and Hopi, for example, the Deity, who was once perceived as female, has been seen as male in recent times, having passed through a phase of androgyny.[18] The Deity at Laguna, Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought Woman, has two "descendants" or "sisters," Nau'ts'ity and I'tcts'ity'i. Somewhere along in the Myth of Creation, I'tcts'ity'i, referred to as "she," is suddenly referred to as "he." An interesting parallel occurs within the Pueblo religious structure, where the Cacique/Hochin is (or are) always referred to as *yaya,* mother, though a male always holds these positions. Yet the title derives from Iyetico, Beautiful Corn Woman, who is our mother. Iyetico returned to *Shipap* because of the men's disobedience. She didn't exactly abandon her children, but she removed herself from their presence, leaving with them her symbol and link, *Iariku,* "corn mother," and the protection of the *cacique.* At least, that's how the current story goes. One suspects that Iyetico didn't leave–that she was abandoned. The men's disobedience led to some disastrous consequences; perhaps the most disastrous (and least talked about) consequence was the increase in violence toward Keres women as the Keres tribes have moved from the rule of Iyetico to the patriarchy.

IV. Lesbians in Tribal Life

Lesbianism and homosexuality were probably commonplace among the old Indians. But the word Lesbian, when applied to traditional Indian culture, does not have the same meanings that it conveys today. The concepts are so dissimilar as to make ludicrous

attempts to relate the long-ago women who dealt exclusively with women on sexual-emotional and spiritual bases to modern women who have in common an erotic attraction for other women.

This is not to make light of the modern Lesbian, but rather to convey some sense of the enormity of the cultural gulf that we must confront and come to terms with when examining any phenomenon related to the American Indian. The modern Lesbian sees herself as distinct from "society." She may be prone to believe herself somehow out of sync with "normal" women, and often suffers great anguish at perceived differences. And while many modern Lesbians have come to see themselves as singular but not sick, many of us are not that secure in our self-assessment. Certainly, however we come to terms with our sexuality, we are not in the position of our American Indian fore-sister who could find safety and security in her bond with another woman because it was perceived to be destined and nurtured by non-human entities, and was therefore acceptable and respectable (albeit, perhaps terrifying) to others in her tribe.

Simple reason dictates that Lesbians did exist in tribal cultures, for they exist now. Because they were tribal people, the terms on which they existed must have been suited to the terms of tribal existence. And women were not perceived to be powerless; their power was great and was perceived to be great by women and men.

Spheres of influence and activity in American Indian cultures were largely divided between the sexes: there were women—goddesses, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunties, shamans, healers, prophets and daughters; and there were men—gods, fathers, uncles, shamans, healers, diviners, brothers, sons. What went on in one group was often unknown to the other.

There were points of confluence, of course, such as in matters pertaining to mundane survival; family-band-clan groups interacted in living arrangements, in the procural or production of food, weaponry, clothing, and living space, and in political function. Men and women got together at certain times to perform social and ceremonial rituals, or to undertake massive tasks such as hunts, harvests, or wars. There were certain reciprocal tasks they performed for one another. But in terms of any real sense of community, there were women and there were men.

In such circumstances, Lesbianism and homosexuality were

probably commonplace. Indeed, same-sex relationships may have been the norm for primary pair-bonding. Families did not consist of traditional nuclear units in any sense. There were clans and bands or villages, but the primary personal unit tended to include members of one's own sex rather than members of the opposite sex.

Women spent a great deal of time together, outside the company of men. Together they spent weeks in menstrual huts; together women tilled their fields, harvested wild foods and herbs, ground grains, prepared skins, smoked or dried foodstuffs, and just visited. Women spent long periods together in their homes and lodges while the men stayed in mens' houses or in the woods, or were out on hunting or fishing expeditions. Young women were often separated from the larger groups for periods of months or years, as were young men. It seems likely that a certain amount of sexual activity ensued. It is questionable whether these practices would be identified as Lesbian by the politically radical Lesbian community of today; for while sex between women probably occurred regularly, women also regularly married and raised children—often adopting children if they did not have any. There were exceptions to this rule. The Objibway, for example, recorded several examples of women who lived alone by choice. These women are not said to have lived with other women; they lived alone, maintaining themselves and shunning human society.

The women who shared their lives with women did, as a matter of course, follow the usual custom of marrying. The duration of marriage and the bonding style of marriage differed among tribes. Many peoples practiced serial monogamy; others acknowledged the marriage bond but engaged in sexual activities outside of it. Adultery was not a generally recognized concept in American Indian cultures, although some tribes did punish severely a woman who "transgressed" the marriage bond. Among many tribes paternity was not very important; one was identified by the identity of the mother and her clan. This practice was widespread in North America at the time of contact and today persists in many regions, including the southwestern United States.

Because traditional American Indian women spent the preponderance of their time with women, and because attitudes toward sex were very different from modern Western views, it is likely, in my opinion, that Lesbianism was an integral part of American Indian life. This seems reasonable given the fact that Lesbianism is a widespread practice even in cultures which have more rigid notions about "appropriate" sexual and bonding behavior. However, relationships among women

did not depend only on opportunity. Lesbianism must be viewed in the context of the spiritual orientation of tribal life.

The prototypical relationship in this sphere was that of sister to sister. Silko makes this apparent in her account of Indian myth: Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought Woman, thought of her sisters, and together they created the Universe, this world and the four worlds below. This concept posits that the original household, the proto-community, was founded on sisterhood. It was based on the power of Creative Thought, and it was that Thought—of three sisters, united—which gave rise to all creation.

It may be possible to distinguish between those women who took advantage of the abundant opportunities to form erotic bonds with other women, and those women whose relationships with women were as much a matter of Spirit-direction as of personal preference (though the two were one in some senses).

It might be that some American Indian women could be seen as "dykes," while some could be seen as "Lesbians," if you think of "dyke" as one who bonds with women in order to further some Spirit and supernatural directive, and "Lesbian" as a woman who is emotionally and physically intimate with other women. (The two groups would not have been mutually exclusive.)

The "dyke" (we might also call her a "ceremonial Lesbian") was likely to have been a medicine woman in a special sense. She probably was a participant in the Spirit (intelligence, force-field) of an Entity or Deity who was particularly close to earth during the Goddess period (though that Deity is still present in the lives of some American Indian women who practice Her ceremonies and participate actively and knowingly in Her reality). Signs of this Deity remain scattered all over the continent: Snake Mound in Ohio is probably one such holdover. La Virgin de Guadalupe is another. There are all sorts of petroglyphs, edifices, and stories concerning some aspect of Her, and Her signs are preserved in much of the lore and literature of many tribes.

American Indian tradition holds that one who is chosen/directed by the Spirits for a particular task must carry out that task. Whoever does not do so is subject to physical and/or psychological destruction. This is not, by the way, because Spirits are naturally vindictive, but rather because it is the nature of supernatural/paranormal power to

act; if it is denied proper expression, it will express inappropriately, and this might (and often does) result in dire events to the chosen one, her loved ones and/or her people.

Essentially, the way is dependent on the kind of power the woman possesses, the kind of Spirit to whom she is attached, and the tribe to which she belongs. Her initiation will take the course that that of males takes: she will be required to pass grueling physical tests; she will be required to lose her mundane persona and transform her soul and mind into other forms. She will be required to follow the lead of Spirits and to carry out the tasks they assign her. For a description of one such rite, Fr. Bernard Haile's translation and notes on the Navajo Beautyway/Nightchant is instructive. Such stories abound in the lore and literature of the American Indian people.[19] They all point to a serious event which results in the death of the protagonist, her visit to the Spirit realms from which she finally returns, transformed and powerful. After such events, she no longer belongs to her tribe or family, but to the Spirit teacher who instructed her. This makes her seem "strange" to many of her folk, and, indeed, she may be accused of witchcraft, though that is more likely to be charged at present than it was in days gone by. (I might note here that among American Indians men are often accused of the same thing. Tales of evil sorcerers abound; in fact, in my reading, they seriously outnumber the tales about sorceresses.)

The Lakota have a word for some of these women, *kŏškalaka,* which is translated as "young man," and "woman who doesn't want to marry." I would guess that its proper translation is "Lesbian" or, colloquially, "dyke." These women are said to be the daughters (the followers/practitioners) of *wiya numpa* or Doublewoman. Doublewoman is a Spirit/Divinity who links two women together making them one in Her power. They do a dance in which a rope is twined between them and coiled to form a "rope baby."[20] The exact purpose or result of this dance is not mentioned, but its significance is clear. In a culture that values children and women because they bear them, two women who don't want to marry (a man) become united by the power of *wiya numpa* and their union is validated ("legitimized," in Malinowski's sense) by the creation of a rope baby. That is, the rope baby signifies the potency of their union in terms that are comprehensible to their society, which therefore legitimizes it.

It is clear that the *kŏškalaka* are perceived as powerful, as are their presumed male counterparts, the *winkte.* But their power does

not constitute the right "to determine her own and others' actions" as Jane Fishburne Collier defines the concept.[21] Rather, it consists of the ability to manipulate physical and non-physical reality toward certain ends. When this power is used to determine others' actions, it at least borders on "black magic" or sorcery.

To clarify the nature of the power I am talking about, let us look briefly at what Lame Deer has to say about the *winkte.* Lame Deer is inclined to speak rather directly, and tends not to romanticize either the concept of power as it is understood and practiced by his people, or the *winkte* as a person who has certain abilities that make him special.

He says that a *winkte* is a person who is a half-man and half-woman, perhaps even a hermaphrodite with both male and female organs. In the old days, *winktes* dressed like women and lived as women. Lame Deer admits that though the Lakotas thought people are what nature, or dreams, make them, still men weren't happy to see their sons running around with *winktes.* Still, he says that there are good men among the *winktes,* and that they have special powers. He took Richard Erdoes (who was transcribing his conversation for their book, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*) with him to a bar to interview a *winkte.* He asked the man to tell him all about *winktes,* and the *winkte* told Lame Deer that "a *winkte* has a gift of prophecy and that he himself could predict the weather." The Lakota go to a *winkte* for a secret name, and such names carry great power, though they are often off-color. "You don't let a stranger know [the secret name]," he says. "He would kid you about it."[22] A *winkte*'s power to name often won the *winkte* great fame, and usually a fine gift as well.

The power referred to here is magical, mysterious and sacred. That does not mean that its possessors are to be regarded as a priestly-pious people, for this is hardly the case. But it does mean that those who possess "medicine power" are to be treated with a certain cautious respect.

It is interesting to note that the story—one of the few reliable accounts of persons whose sexual orientation differs from the hetero-sexual—concerns a male, a *winkte.* The stories about *kŏ̆skalaka* are yet to be told. It seems to me that this suppression is a result of a series of coincidental factors: the historical events connected with the conquest of Native America; the influence of Christianity and the attendant brutal suppression of medicine people and medicine

practices; the patriarchal suppression of all references to power held by women; Christian notions of "proper" sexual behavior; and, recently, a deliberate attempt on the part of American Indian men to suppress all knowledge among their own people of the traditional place of women as powerful medicine people and leaders in their own right. The medicine-Lesbian (to coin a term) has become anathema; her presence must remain hidden until all power she held has been totally blanketed by silence. It is to prevent what I believe to be a serious tragedy that this article is being written. We must not allow this conspiracy of silence to prevent us from discovering who we have been and who we are. We must not forget the true source of our being, nor its powerfulness, and we must not allow ourselves to be deluded by patriarchal perceptions of power which inexorably rob us of our true power. As Indian women, as Lesbians, we must make the effort to understand clearly what is at stake, and this means that we must reject all beliefs that work against ourselves, however much we have come to cherish them as we have lived among the patriarchs.

V. Conclusion

Womanculture is unregulated by males, and is misperceived by ethnographers. Perhaps this is so because it is felt—at least among ethnographers' tribal informants—that it is wise to let "sleeping dogs lie." There may also be fear of what power might be unleashed if the facts about American Indian Lesbianism were discussed directly. A story that has recently come to my attention might best clarify this statement.

Two white Lesbians, feminists and social activists, were determined to expand their activities beyond the Lesbian and Feminist communities, and to this end became involved in an ecological movement that centered on American Indian concerns. In pursuit of this course, they invited a Sioux medicine man to join them, and arranged to pick him up from the small rural town he was visiting. When he saw them, he accused them of being Lesbians, and became very angry. He abused them verbally, in serious and obscene terms. They left him where he was and returned home, angry and confused.

A certain amount of their confusion was a result of their misperception of Indians and of this particular medicine man. I have friends in the primarily white Lesbian community who seem to think that Indian men, particularly medicine men, are a breed apart who

are "naturally just." Like other Americans, Indians are inclined to act in ways that are consistent with their picture of the world, and, in this particular Indian's picture, the world was not big enough for Lesbians. The women didn't announce their sexual preference to him, by the way; but he knew a *kŏskalaka* when he saw one, and reacted accordingly.

A friend who knew the women involved asked me about this encounter. She couldn't understand why the medicine man acted the way he had. I suspect that he was afraid of the Lesbian's power, and I told her that. An American Indian woman to whom I recounted the story had the same reaction. *Kŏskalaka* have singular power, and this medicine man was undoubtedly aware of it. The power of the *koskalaka* can (potentially, at least) override that of men, even very powerful medicine men such as the one in my story. I know this particular man, and he is quite powerful as a medicine man.

Not so long ago, the American Indians were clearly aware of the power that women possessed. Even now there are those among traditionals (those who follow the old ways) who know the medicine power of women. This is why a clear understanding of the supernatural forces and their potential in our lives is necessary. More than an interesting tour through primitive exotica is to be gained.

Before we worry about collecting more material from aborigines, before we join forces with those who are in a position to destroy us, and before we decide, like Sherry Ortner, that belief in ancient matriarchal civilization is an irrational concept born of conjecture and wish, let us adjust our perspective to match that of our foresisters. Then, when we search the memories and lore of tribal peoples, we might be able to see what eons and all kinds of institutions have conspired to hide from our eyes.

The evidence is all around us. It remains for us to *dis*cover what it means.

NOTES

[1] I use the term American Indian, rather than Native American. While Native American was the usage introduced on college campuses in the Sixties and Seventies, American Indian is the preferred term of Indian communities and organizations.

[2] Jonathan Katz, in *Gay American History* (New York: Crowell, 1976), included a chapter on "Native Americans/Gay Americans, 1528-1976"

(pp. 281-334). Fourteen entries in that chapter relate to women. Several of these refer to Indian women who dressed in male clothing. Others cite studies or accounts of the Kutenai Indians (Claude E. Schaeffer, 1811), the Mohave (George Devereux, 18??), the Crow (Edwin T. Denig, 1855-56), the Klamath (Leslie Spier, 1930), the Yuma (C. Daryll Forde, 1931), and the Kaska (J.J. Honigmann, 1964) which document or suggest the existence of Lesbian relationships. Other entries cite Indian legends involving Lesbian relationships.

[3] Frederick Manfred, *The Manly-Hearted Woman* (New York: Bantam, 1978).

[4] Hamilton A. Tyler, *Pueblo Gods and Myths* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), pp. 116-124.

[5] For a detailed discussion of this, see Anthony Wallace, *The Life and Death of the Seneca* (New York: 1969), and "The Law of the Great Peace of the People of the Longhouse [Iroquois]" and "Now This Is Gaiwiio," in *Literature of the American Indian,* Thomas Sanders and Walter Peek, eds. (New York: Glencoe Press, 1973).

[6] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Sex, Culture, and Myth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 12.

[7] Malinowski, p. 12.

[8] Malinowski, p. 12.

[9] Malinowski, p. 13.

[10] Malinowski, p. 13.

[11] Malinowski, p. 13.

[12] Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture," in *Woman, Culture and Society,* Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 65-71.

[13] Ortner, p. 70.

[14] Ortner, p. 70.

[15] John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions: The Life of a Sioux Medicine Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Touchstone Books, 1972), pp. 148-149.

[16] Lois Paul, "Work and Sex in a Guatemalan Village," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, pp. 293-298. Paul's article discusses these concepts in a peasant culture, that is, one which exists in an agricultural, pastoral environment, and whose social structure is based on perceived relationship to the land. This type of culture occupies a niche which might be thought of as halfway between industrial, urban people and tribal, Spirit-centered people.

[17] Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. 1.

[18] Anthony Purley, "Keres Pueblo Concepts of Deity," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1974, I:1), pp. 28-30.

[19] See John Bierhorst, ed., *Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature: Quetzal coatl/The Ritual of Condolence/Cuceb/The Night Chant* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974). Fr. Haile's work is included in Leland C. Wyman, ed., *Beautyway: A Navajo Ceremonial* (New York: Bollingen Series LIII-Pantheon Books, 1975).

[20] Elaine A. Jahner and J. DeMollie, *Lakota Belief and Ritual,* Part III, "Narratives" (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).

[21] Jane Fishburne Collier, "Women in Politics," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, p. 90.

[22] Lame Deer, p. 150.

[23] Joan Bamberger, "The Myths of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, pp. 260-271.

ANATOMY LESSON

A black woman and a small grey one talk about their bodies—about putting a piece of their anatomy in their pockets upon entering any given room.

When entering a room full of soldiers who fear hearts, you put your heart in your back pocket *the black woman explains*—it is important not to intimidate. The soldiers wear guns—not in their back pockets.

You let the heart fester there. You let the heart seeth. You let the impatience of the heart build and build until the power of the heart hidden begins to be felt in the room—until the absence of the heart begins to take on the shape of a presence—until the soldiers look to you and begin to beg you to open up your heart to them, so anxious are they to see what it is they fear they fear.

Do not be seduced. Do not forget for a minute that the soldiers wear guns. Hang onto your heart. Ask them first what they'll give up to see it. Tell them they can begin with their arms. Only then, will you begin to negotiate.

FOR THE COLOR OF MY MOTHER

I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother
speaking for her through the unnamed part of the mouth
the wide-arched muzzle of brown women

at two
my upper lip split open
clear to the tip of my nose
it spilled forth a cry that would not yield
that travelled down six floors of hospital
where doctors wound me into white bandages
only the screaming mouth exposed

the gash sewn back into a snarl
would last for years

I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother
speaking for her

at five, her mouth
pressed into a seam
a fine blue child's line drawn across her face
her mouth, pressed into mouthing english
mouthing yes yes yes
mouthing stoop lift carry
(sweating wet sighs into the field
her red bandana comes loose from under the huge brimmed hat
moving across her upper lip)

at fourteen, her mouth
painted, the ends drawn up
the mole in the corner colored in darker larger mouthing yes
she praying no no no
lips pursed and moving

at forty-five, her mouth
bleeding into her stomach
the hole gaping growing redder
deepening with my father's pallor
finally stitched shut from hip to breastbone
an inverted V
Vera
Elvira

I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother speaking for her

as it should be
dark women come to me
sitting in circles
I pass through their hands
the head of my mother
painted in clay colors

touching each carved feature
swollen eyes and mouth
they understand the explosion the splitting
open contained within the fixed expression

they cradle her silence
nodding to me

from VOYAGE TO LESBOS

ATHENS

the travel folder does not say
Sappho slept with women

the pulp novel postulates
a widowed father
a merchant husband
a pederast poet friend

the bad translation, dusty
between phrasebooks at Pantelides'
is circumspect

but we're not fooled
we lock our door at the YWCA
and fuse, faces flushed,
palms damp, tongues
tasting the names of Sappho's lovers:
Anactoria
Andromeda
Atthis
Damophyla
Erinna
Gyrinnô
Gongyla
Gorgô
Herô
Mnasidika
Pleistodika
and Timas of Anatolia who died young

MYTILENE

mulecarts clatter down the dockside road
spraying dust into our breakfast

yesterday, looking for the castle
on the hill, we hiked
past every little shop in Mytilene
to a spot so lush with flowers
we called it a suburb
but never found the gate,
only a bare slope, ruins
crumbling round its shoulders

in the sunset, the island
turned to gold
our skin, our hair illuminated
and the women in black,
arms linked & laughing
on their way home from church,
gold teeth gleaming like Byzantine ikons
asked if we were sisters

the sign said AMAΓΦREYETAI HΦO TOΓRAΦIA
but my hidden camera
carried their portrait safely home
this morning, we'll just snap marble Sappho
turning her back on Conservative Party Headquarters
and try again for the castle
after our afternoon nap in the birthday-cake hotel
where the sun reverberates off zinc rooftops
and seagulls perched on the Cathedral dome
shriek with pleasure over the din of the bells

PLOMARI

our room has a double bed
but no windows

Marika the landlady, 22
& 2 kids already
promises a table for tomorrow

my husband lets me have anything I want:
studying physics
going to be an engineer

never suspects what we do at night
enclosed in her pink stucco walls

SITE OF THE PETRIFIED FOREST

up here the hills are so old so worn
it is the end of the planet as we know it
it feels like the beginning of the world
nothing but a goatpath winding behind us
to remind us we have come this far
with our thin shoes and city legs
trying to make ourselves heard above the howling wind
the sun, indifferent, burns on

there is no forest
there are no trees
only stone stumps squatting in the scrub
like toads, sole survivors
of a world destroyed by fire
not a bird not a fly on their ancient surfaces
patient and rough as crones

to the men who come nightly armed with chisels,
shatter their silex testimony
and carry home the splinters to adorn
upright pianos and the counters of cafés
they reply:
we are our mothers' offspring
bred in the very center of the earth
we have learned to wait for rain
up here where the air is clean
we shall grow again

ERESSOS

fragments of poems
fragments of marble
volcanic rockface rising from the sea

inland, an ancient plane-tree
broods over the deserted village square
and shuttered houses sleep in the sun's glare

the grandpa population's gone to the shore
for the summer, ruddy under straw hats
puffing their pipes
showing off toddlers between sips of ouzo

we are living above a café called "Love"
we wake at dawn to *eggplant! squash! tomatoes!*
escape nightly from motorcycle thunder
between each other's thighs

and finally, one morning,
other lesbians—what joy
to watch them, white jumpsuits,
purple vests, ordering breakfast
in Sappho Square!
we don't need to ask where they come from
their language (eyes, knees,
fingertips to cheek)
requires no translation

the local women
giggling on their doorsteps
stare

fragments of poems
fragments of marble
volcanic rockface rising from the sea

I imagine Sappho walking here,
tiny and weathered, her dark hair
shot with grey
nails clipped for the lyre
she has left her students splashing in shallow water
her lips move noiselessly as fine sand underfoot
remembering her childhood:

this vast expanse of beach/bright as a woman's skin
this whispering sea/clear as a woman's voice
these rocks/once lava, pitted cleft and chambered
like the convolutions of a lover's cunt

born of such a landscape,
grown in her incandescent light
you lie awake at night in foreign cities
longing for her uncompromising love,
seeking her breast forever
risking everything to sing of her:
then suddenly you're the Black Swan,
Lady Sappho of Mytilene
teacher of moonstruck girls
mother of tall Kleis who can't carry a tune

it is strange to be famous in your own lifetime
it is never quite the same when you come back

fragments of poems
fragments of marble
volcanic rockface rising from the sea

so might it be with me:
my Atthis gone in search of her own dream,
my island changed, my name
a synonym for unmentionable passions,
my lines consumed by fire
but nonetheless immortal, my life
defiantly confirmed by the women who come after

MAUREEN BRADY

NOVENA

1

All through the years that Aunt Mary Elizabeth sent me novenas I didn't fully understand them or her or who she was to me. She was gaunt. She stood cooking on the coal stove with her back to me, wearing a cardigan sweater. Her shoulder blades were like the hooks on the kitchen wall where the coats hung–blunt prominences. I thought of the scarecrow in the garden, the overseer. Large scapulae without the flesh filled out. This is what I thought of when her Christmas card came addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Brian Maguire and family. Inside the card was a tiny envelope and inside this envelope a small card inscribed with the message: Commencing December 20, 1950 and continuing for the next nine days, fifteen novenae will be said for you at the request of Miss Mary Elizabeth Maguire. How had she decided on fifteen when there were six of us?

2

Mother bought dish towels for our family to give to Aunt Mary Elizabeth for Christmas. I wandered through the gift shop after mass and imagined myself grown up, with my own money, buying her a beautiful blue holy card with a radiant picture of Mary on it, or perhaps a scapular. A scapular was to be worn under your clothing, against your skin. The problem was to think of Aunt Mary Elizabeth with skin. She seemed to use her body only as a skeleton she traveled with–to church, to the factory, to the cemetery where she visited the dead.

3

She wrote letters all winter that started and ended with: "The roads are so slippery." She described traveling the river road to the factory every day. "The curves are treacherous," she said, "and the snow gets plowed right over the river bank, and it seems like that's where I'll end if the arthritis doesn't get me first."

4

"Are you scared of the dead?" she asked me once. "I mean does the idea that their flesh has gone cold and heavy frighten you?"

"I guess so," I said, our white gloved hands clasped together.

"You needn't be," she said. "Think of the lightness of the spirit without the body."

Was it walking in the cemetery that made me think her teeth had rattled as she spoke?

5

Spring was her time. In June she wrote: "It's not that I wouldn't like to see you but the nerve of my brother to think I would go away on the long weekend when he knows perfectly well that I always visit the dead on Memorial Day."

Then: "Things grow up so bad in the summer. If you come to visit me you might pass right by this place and not know it's here."

I always think of her in spring—the ground still hard and barren, the snow in dribbles on the north side of the hill. I think of holding her hand, climbing between the gravestones toward Granny and the others—Aunt Mary Elizabeth's stillborn sister and my great uncle Jack who plunged over the river bank and required a good deal of prayer since he was drunk.

6

Once I sat on one of the stones. Mary Elizabeth had wandered over to visit the neighbors' graves and I found a low stone and sat with my dress pulled down over my knees, my black missal in my lap. I wished that I had one with gold pages. I closed my eyes and tried to communicate to Aunt Mary Elizabeth with my will: Next year for Easter please notice that I don't have a missal with gold-edged pages. Mine have red edges. I opened my eyes again and stared at the sharp contrast of the black book and the white gloves, so pure. She came from behind and pinched my rear just below my waist. She had bumpy joints in her fingers from the arthritis and I couldn't believe she could pinch that hard. I started to yelp but her teeth were in my ear, rattling. "Hush," she said in a whisper. "You were sitting on someone's spirit. How would you like someone to sit on yours?"

A large cloud moved in and I was shivering by the time we reached the car.

7

At home I had a section of my top drawer marked off for Aunt Mary Elizabeth's gifts: Granny's funeral card, a scapular, a white lace mantilla, my blue rosary, some holy cards which I alternated so a different one was showing, my missal, my white gloves. I was a lover of baseball and carried my baseball cards with me. Each time I changed my underwear I had a glance at my Easter gifts, and I knew they were mine, though I was not sure who I was that had them.

8

"Do you still have the rosary I gave you last Easter?"

"Yes, Aunt Mary Elizabeth, the blue one."

"You are a good child to hold onto your things."

She told me my cousin lost hers. "She puts it in her lap and when she kneels it drops and her mind is so much on God that she doesn't hear." Aunt Mary Elizabeth said she told Coleen, "The rosary is a circle, never finished. You can always say another one." She is really telling this to me. "Still I see her rushing," she says of Coleen. "You would think she was going somewhere."

I always thought that Aunt Mary Elizabeth would will all of Granny's religious objects to this cousin, the first female heir in my generation, but then I saw that I might have a chance if I didn't lose my rosary, if I learned to keep going around the circle without boredom.

9

I lost my religion the year I went away to college but continued to receive my novenas from Aunt Mary Elizabeth in with the family package at Christmas. By the time I was an adult with my own money and could have bought her holy cards, I had forgotten I ever intended to. I had my own apartment, my own dresser. In the top drawer, my missal sat under the last pair of white gloves she had given me. Never worn. She who refused to betray the dead for a Memorial Day weekend away could not be told that I no longer went to church. No longer wore my white gloves, carried my black missal.

But Christmas, a card addressed to me—Miss Irene Maguire—and inside the card, a tiny envelope, and inside that—fifteen novenas. For me, alone. Scarecrow. Overseer. She knew. A woman of vision.

10

"I wish I could travel to visit you but I don't know when," she wrote. "I go down the river road and back six days a week and the factory is always there. They own you in this life but they won't have me in the next."

"At last the roads are not so slippery so I hope you'll come for Easter."

11

Winter was hard here, much freezing rain and the pipes froze more than once, but now I have a warm sun on my back and cool brown earth at my feet. I rake the soil that has just been tilled for the garden. My hands are thin-skinned from winter. Blisters begin to form and the muscles of my back feel as if they are curling into a rope, but the evenness of the patch of ground I have finished draws me to go on.

12

Her brothers always say that Aunt Mary Elizabeth is a spinster because they did such a fine job of protecting her from their not-to-be-trusted contemporaries when she was young. I wonder what Granny told her. In my memory Granny is an old woman with pure white hair, wrinkles so deep they enfold my imagination. She rocks in a high-backed wicker rocker. She has false teeth, and as I hover around her chair she takes them out, covers their entire mass with her hands and rattles them in my ears. I tell her this gives me goosebumps and she chuckles at my fears.

When Granny died, my mother and father decided I was too young to go to the funeral. How could I explain to them that I thought she meant to invite me?

13

The winter coats still hang in the hall, heavy gloves poking from their pockets. I must cover my hands to go on raking. I am over a

decade past childhood and still, in my top drawer, I have a section for relics. And in all these years since Aunt Mary Elizabeth gave me my last pair of white gloves, they have never been worn.

14

The gloves are soft, inside and out, and soothing to my blisters. It is Easter Sunday. I rake my garden until the whole patch has constancy. The gloves are perfect. I am lightheaded with the discovery of them. I furrow several rows for early planting, stoop and drop the seeds with careful spacing. I go back and cover the seeds with a small hill of dirt, tamp it with my gloved hands. I send a message to Aunt Mary Elizabeth: These rows are my novenas for you. I hope that the sun is shining in Pennsylvania where I know Aunt Mary Elizabeth must be visiting Granny in the graveyard.

My gloves are still pure white on the back side but have turned brown on the palm side. I remember her pinch: so sudden, so firm. I go on tamping the earth, feeling the rope muscles of my back touched by the sun.

COAST TO COAST

There are days when housework seems the only
outlet old funnel I've poured caldrons through
old servitude In grief and fury bending
to the accustomed tasks the vacuum cleaner plowing
realms of dust the mirror scoured grey webs
behind framed photographs brushed away
the grey-seamed sky enormous in the west
snow gathering in corners of the north

Seeing through the prism
you who gave it me
You, bearing ceaselessly
yourself, the witness
Rainbow dissolves the Hudson This chary, stinting
skin of late winter ice forming and breaking up
The unprotected seeing it through
with their ordinary valor

Rainbow composed of ordinary light
February-flat
grey-white of a cheap enamelled pan
breaking into veridian, azure, violet
You write: *Three and a half weeks lost from writing. . . .*
I think of the word *protection*
who it is we try to protect and why

Seeing through the prism Your face, fog-hollowed burning
cold of eucalyptus hung with butterflies
lavender of rockbloom
O and your anger uttered in silence word and stammer
shattering the fog lances of sun
piercing the grey Pacific unanswerable tide
carving itself in clefts and fissures of the rock
Beauty of your breasts your hands
turning a stone a shell a weed a prism in coastal light
traveller and witness
the passion of the speechless
driving your speech
protectless

If you can read and understand this poem
send something back: a burning strand of hair
a still-warm, still-liquid drop of blood
a shell
thickened from being battered year on year
send something back.

1978

TRANSIT

> *1. a) passage through or across. b) a transition; change....*
> *4. in* astronomy, *a) the apparent passage of a heavenly body across a given meridian or through the field of a telescope. (Webster)*

When I meet the skier she is always
walking, skis and poles shouldered, toward the mountain
free-swinging in worn boots
over the path new-sifted with fresh snow
her greying dark hair almost hidden by
a cap of many colors
her fifty-year-old, strong, impatient body
dressed for cold and speed
her eyes level with mine

And when we pass each other I look into her face
wondering what we have in common
where our minds converge
for we do not pass each other, she passes me
as I halt beside the fence tangled in snow,
she passes me as I shall never pass her
in this life

Yet I remember us together
climbing Chocorua, summer nineteen forty-five
details of vegetation beyond the timberline
lichens, wildflowers, birds,
amazement where the trail broke out onto the granite ledge
sloped over blue lakes, green pines, giddy air
like dreams of flying

When sisters separate they haunt each other
is she, who I might once have been, haunts me
or is it I who do the haunting
halting and watching on the path
how she appears again through lightly-blowing
crystals, how her strong knees carry her,
how unaware she is, how simple
this is for her, how without let or hindrance
she travels in her body
until the point of passing, where the skier
and the cripple must decide
to recognize each other?

1979

WHAT IS POSSIBLE

A clear night if the mind were clear

If the mind were simple, if the mind were bare
of all but the most classic necessities:
wooden spoon knife mirror
cup lamp chisel
a comb passing through hair beside a window
a sheet
  thrown back by the sleeper

A clear night in which two planets
seem to clasp each other in which the earthly grasses
shift like silk in starlight
  If the mind were clear
and if the mind were simple you could take this mind
this particular state and say
This is how I would live if I could choose:
this is what is possible

A clear night. But the mind
of the woman imagining all this the mind
that allows all this to be possible
is not clear as the night
is never simple cannot clasp
its truths as the transiting planets clasp each other
does not so easily
  work free from remorse
does not so easily
  manage the miracle
for which mind is famous
  or used to be famous

does not at will become abstract and pure

this woman's mind

does not even will that miracle

having a different mission
in the universe

If the mind were simple if the mind were bare
it might resemble a room a swept interior
but how could this now be possible

given the voices of the ghost-towns
the desert's tiny and vast configurations
needing to be understood
the oracular night
with its densely working sounds

If it could ever come down to anything like
a comb passing through hair beside a window

no more than that
a sheet
thrown back by the sleeper

but the mind
of the woman thinking this is wrapped in battle
is on another mission
a stalk of grass dried feathery weed rooted in snow
in frozen air stirring a fierce wand graphing

Her finger also tracing
pages of a book
knowing better than the poem itself
knowing through the poem
through ice-feathered panes

the winter
flexing its talons
the hawk-wind
poised to kill

1980

FAMILY REUNION

I

Her children are scattered all over now. And so is Sheila. In the past two years she's gone from New York to New Orleans and involvement in women's politics, to a commune in Arkansas, to a California film group and back to Arkansas again. And her possessions too are scattered. Rugs left with her ex-husband—she's going to repossess them as soon as she has her own place. Furniture in the attic of a New Jersey barn that might be sold by now. Boxes of books—how many, three boxes, four, six, she doesn't remember anymore—with a friend in San Francisco, the books she can't live without. Clothes, jewelry, paintings, photos left in a winding trail across the country and more important, parts of herself, deep parts of herself caught tangled in people's lives and endeavors, torn off by departures, hers and others'.

When she comes back again to Arkansas her friends are surprised. "We thought you'd stay in San Francisco. It seems like everything's happening there."

"It is. There's everything there you could possibly want or imagine and more and too much. Everything but a peaceful space to sort it all out. I had to come home for that." So for the first time in her unmarried life Sheila calls a place home and comes back to it—but to town, not to the struggle on the commune.

She rents a tiny house with a big yard. "I've got to have a garden even if I'm not in the country." And she isn't going to live collectively for a while, she says. She has too much to think about and needs time to be alone.

But then the question of loving women, the question that's agonized her since New Orleans and chased her across the country, moves in with her. Nancy, sick with some undiagnosed illness, comes to share the house and they fall in love. Nancy, who was only going to stay a week or so while she found another place.

"Oh yes, time to be alone," Margo says mockingly. "Well, people say all kinds of things about relationships but when it comes to it, I believe what I see."

"Well I meant it when I said it, Margo. I thought I'd had enough of relationships for a while."

"That's different, that was with men. Anyhow, like I said, I believe what I see." Margo is careful to remain alone.

So the question comes and lands in Sheila's hands as gently as a small bird. But the small bird has a beak and can use it and sometimes draws blood.

"You think you're better than me because I've always been gay and you're just learning to love women," Nancy shouts at her. "You think I'm queer and you're not." Sheila cries and feels deeply cut, not because it isn't true but because it is. And lying wakefully in the dark with one of her anxiety attacks she thinks—Nancy's right, she's right about me but how can I change that? And do I want to? – The central root question of her identity floating in the shifting fluid of her life. —But I love her so much—she says silently, passionately to the night powers and curls tight against Nancy's body, always lighter, thinner. "Leave her alone you monsters," she says to the darkness, to whatever it is that saps and sucks away at life. She feels herself sleeping between death and love, her body like a shield.

But mostly Sheila finds it easy loving another woman. Even in their angriest fights there are some lines not crossed, some respect for the person that remains. She never feels that threat of annihilation at the core and realizes how often in fights with Tom it was not her idea she was defending, not the correctness of what she was saying but her very survival, her right to existence. And even Ian that she lived with for a while at the commune. He'd been so different, a much gentler man, wanting peace in the world but when he was hurt he fought that same way. How do men learn that, the words to destroy with and more than that the will to use them? Sheila can think quick enough of things to say but women are trained not to use words that way. —It's castrating, that terrible word—castrating. And men have no such restraint. Women after all don't have balls, so men can say anything, words to crush the ego, the heart, the soul. Symbolic castration, words to break the spirit—the very thing women value in each other.

Living with Nancy is a gentling experience. Sheila can feel hard

little crusts and scabs, grown for protection, scaling away, soft parts of herself expanding. Sometimes, coming down in the morning, she sees the light falling in just a certain way on flowers Nancy's picked or stones that she's arranged and Sheila's filled with a sense of warmth and safety. Friends tease her for being so stable. Charlotte says, "You haven't moved in three months. Are you settling down? Getting conservative? Where will I get my vicarious adventures now?" But they're glad for her.

A house, a lover to share it with, a job. She drives a bus for a government agency, taking old people on errands—doctors' appointments, shopping, sometimes a movie. A funny job but she loves doing it. It's mostly women. They like and trust her. It makes her feel useful and pays enough to live on. Not much, it's only four days a week but she doesn't need much and it leaves her some time free. And Nancy stays home and does indexing when jobs come in but the work is sporadic, sometimes nothing for a while, sometimes so much that Sheila has to help. (They've just struggled through a three-volume American history.) Nancy sleeps a lot or rests upstairs by the big window that looks out over the yard toward the hills. They send for Sheila's books. When the boxes come it's like Christmas. The books are lined up now on the low shelf under the window, waiting for Nancy. "I've never had so much time to read before." There's not much furniture but they paint the house white and fill it with big brightly covered cushions. And now that the weather's getting cold they finally manage to get a working refrigerator from the landlord.

The roof is the real problem. It's leaking more with each rain, tiny veins of water, probing, probing. . . . But the landlord is stubborn. When Sheila calls up he says, "No way. Not going to put on a new roof. That's crazy. The whole place is falling apart. It's going to be torn down in a year or so—garden apartments."

"Well, for right now it's leaking. At least get someone to patch it."

"I can't. Nobody wants to do that kind of work."

"I'll do it myself, then. Just get me a ladder, the materials and take some off the rent."

"I can't. The insurance. . . ."

"Damn the insurance!" she's shouting into the phone, enjoying

it. Nancy is clapping. "That damn roof of yours is leaking all over. Our clothes, our books, everything's getting ruined. Are you going to pay for that?" She hangs up feeling satisfied and not expecting much. After three more calls he brings it all, a ladder, tar, shingles, rope. He mumbles and shuffles and gives terrible warnings, ". . . never saw a woman do such a thing." And finally he leaves.

Sheila stands straddling the roof peak, her arms up, fingers like arrows in the blue sky. "I'm queen of the air," she shouts.

"If you fall off before you get that roof fixed it's going to be a wet winter."

"It's okay. I'm spider woman. I can't fall. Nancy, I love it up here. I do. Do you want to be up here? Is this something you wanted to do?"

"Don't worry, I haven't the slightest desire to be up there. And I don't feel at all deprived or oppressed holding the ladder."

But it's not easy maneuvering with a rope on the steep roof and more than once she feels herself slipping before the rope snugs up on her. Later she wonders what her sons would have thought seeing her up there. She often does that, seeing herself over again through their eyes, giving her life a peculiar complexity, the quality of double exposure coming at the strangest times.

"They'd be proud of you and if they weren't they should be. The hell with them anyway. Who cares? I'm jealous of your past. It doesn't leave us alone. I feel like it's peering into our lives, into our beds. They've had your time. It's my turn now."

The next night they lie together in the dark, safe and dry, listening to the rain. "I love the sound of rain when it's outside." They sink back into that deep voluptuous body comfort, shared warmth and safety from the elements. And for days afterward Sheila feels a sense of accomplishment.

"A few years ago I wouldn't even have tried that. I'm amazed at how well I did it. Do you think it's alright or am I becoming too male, turning into the man of the house?"

Nancy makes a sound like a laugh and cough combined. "Look—a year ago I could have out-run and out-climbed and out-danced you easily and a year from now I'll probably be able to again, so don't get

too uppity. Just enjoy your glory while it lasts. And besides I like my women tough." Nancy is lying in the upstairs bed looking particularly fragile with the quilt pulled up high around her.

The house is dry now but drafty. Sheila is talking about getting one of her rugs back from Tom when she goes up north for Thanksgiving.

"If he'll let go of it. He'll probably moan and groan about how I'm taking it away from my children too and tell me again how he's kept the home together for them—the twist of guilt. But we need it here."

She wants the rug because the house is old and hard to heat and the dampness is especially bad for Nancy but more than anything and without her knowing it, she wants it because it was her grandmother's. Somehow having that rug on the floor will make her own life seem less bizarre to her and more familiar.

Going to New York for Thanksgiving—the first time she's been there in two years. Back. . . back. . . into a primeval time, a different geological era. And they'll all be there, all her sons, home from the various places they've scattered to. Josh up from Florida where he works in a marine lab, the other two from schools in Michigan and Vermont. She's seen them separately a few times since she left but never together. And of course Tom will be there. She pictures his bulk standing in the doorway as she comes up the walk. All of them—together—that solid male presence, so loud and absolute, the way they talk, how they occupy space, sit in the chair, in the room, in the house, in the world. Will there be space for her in that scene?

Women in New Orleans used to say—three sons? Why'd you have three sons?—Why indeed, a feminist with three sons, as if she'd done it on purpose. What hurt was having no daughters to share her new life with. —But these are my children and I love them. I carried each one in my body for nine months. . . Alien seed. She remembers how they each had stopped being fluid and light, had hardened, solidified, moved away from her love. Josh had kept it the longest, that loose flowing quality of the new child. That was because he was part reptile. He was the one who caught frogs and toads and turtles and most of all snakes. Snakes that he carried in his pocket and up his sleeves, wore casually around his neck. Memories of her own childhood. She'd taught all three of them about the woods. But Josh had gotten more of it. He was most hers, softhearted, cried easily—until it was

beaten out of him, over years. And she'd had to watch, helpless. That man's world has no place for a boy that cries. He's learned to toughen up. His brothers aren't ashamed of him anymore. He's with them now, part of that block of maleness, the old flowing rivers parched dry—cracked and hard.

Going back. . . going back. . . She'll have to meet their judgments on her life, on herself. Two years, two years and how can she account for them? "Nancy, I'm scared. Why did I ever agree to do this? How can I be with them and stay myself? Keep hold of my new life, of this reality?"

They're up in Nancy's room visiting with Margo. Nancy is lying with her head on Sheila's lap. The room is filled with sunlight and tiny rainbows flash from the crystals hanging in the window. The whole space seems to float in light and color.

"I'll be there with you," Nancy says. "Even though my body's here, my love will go with you."

"That's right, we'll all be there with you, all our spirits, any time of night or day. And this rotten old atheist will even light a candle for you every night, send you energy. How about that? Just don't tell anyone else or they'll think I'm going soft." Margo's pacing around the room, unconscious of the rainbows slipping across her face.

Sheila shakes her head. "I can see Tom standing there with his square bulk, saying, 'Well, you got rid of your husband, left your children, you had the freedom you wanted. What did you do with it?' " The accounting, what have you made of yourself? Have you scored in the world and how?

She'd been a waitress, an apprentice typesetter, taken a carpentry class, tossed around fifty and one hundred pound bags of food for the co-op in New Orleans and also helped form and felt driven out of the women's collective there, been on unemployment, food stamps, welfare, learned as much about movie cameras and editing as the women at SkyFilms could teach her. And what was she doing with it all? —Driving old people around in a bus. "And what does all that amount to anyway?"

"It's your life and you're living it. That's what it amounts to. Why does it matter what he thinks?"

"But look at it. I have no profession. There's nothing I'm good at, not really. I've spent two years just going around in circles."

"He's still in your head, isn't he?" Margo's voice is getting louder. "You've got that fucker out of your life but he's still in your head, sitting there making his fucking judgments and you're letting him, damnit! You're letting him!" She stamps to the end of the room and hits the wall.

Nancy sits up with a groan. "Margo, can you rant more quietly? This house can't take it and neither can I. Privileges of the sick."

"Sorry." Margo comes to sit by them on the bed. "But I'm right aren't I? You're still letting him tell you what to do, how to see yourself."

"No," Sheila says shaking her head. "It has to do with how I feel about myself."

"That's bullshit—pure bullshit! You don't even believe that." Margo's shouting again.

"So you're going to push me around instead and tell me what to think and that's better because you're a woman." Now Sheila's shouting too. "Is that what you feel, Margo? That it's okay for you to bully me because you're a woman?"

"Look, you two. I need some rest or at least some restful space and this isn't it." Nancy lies down again, sighing wearily.

Margo stands up. "I have to go back anyway and work on Charlotte's truck." Stomping downstairs, she calls back, "If you want to keep that man in your head you're welcome to him. Just don't bring him back here with you."

After she's left Sheila asks, "Nancy, is she right? What do you think?"

"You know she's right."

"You don't think it's my own feelings too?"

"I don't think you know what your feelings are yet."

"Sometimes you are like a child. Your life is very new to you still. And sometimes in different ways we're all like children."

Sheila strokes Nancy's hair gently, watching the colors from the crystals flicker on her face. She sees the knowledge of death there, not just the paleness but a subtle inwardness and wonders as she has so often, what it really feels like to be inside that other person.

"I'm so confused at times. I feel all caught and mashed up between different values."

"Do you like what you're doing? Do you think it's worthwhile?"

"Of course I do."

"Then why are you asking some man up in New York if it's okay?"

"Nancy, I'm scared of going. My whole past is waiting there to swallow me up. I was married to that man for 23 years. I'm really scared."

"I know you are. I've been watching it." Nancy turns her face away so her expression's hidden and asks very quietly, "Will you come back?"

"Nancy—of course! Why the hell wouldn't I?"

"I thought maybe you'd marry them all again."

"Not likely." She hugs Nancy close against her. "No chance."

And anyhow they're gone, scattered now, the family she's left doesn't exist that way anymore. But she dreams about them still, young and together. For the week before she leaves she dreams about them every night, her boys as little children and Tom, younger, less cynical, less hard—dreams full of warmth and anxiety.

II

This familiar room but so unfamiliar, as if seen from underwater, blurred and wavy and at the same time solid—so solid—everything massive, appropriate furniture in its appropriate place, no empty corners. Furniture she'd helped select, refinish, arrange, and now it's oppressing her. Unmoving material ghosts of oak and maple stare out blindly. Sheila feels stifled, suffocated here. No—it's more like drowning, going under, her bones turning soft. She's actually spent years of her life in this room and here it still is, a monument, a museum kept in living order. Longing for her bright pillows and quilts and cozy disorder, she thinks—he should have burned it all and started over.

They're all greeting her, talking at once and it's hard to understand the heavy rumble of their voices. She's not used to male voices anymore and can't distinguish the words. She answers or tries to answer, tries to say what will seem normal, tries not to show her panic at the terrifyingly familiar-unfamiliar, not to let them see she's drowning, that parts of her life are colliding and ripping apart, that floods of feelings are rushing through the gap.

Out of the din Sheila can hear Toby saying, "Looks like you lost a lot of weight Mom." And she's able to answer, "That's because I've been moving so fast." She laughs and they laugh with her and that steadies her a little. Tom's watching her intently—studying, waiting. She avoids his eyes. He wants to know who I am and I'm not ready for that yet, not ready. But she knows it's coming soon.

Sitting down to eat they take the same places at the table they've always had except for Josh and Toby who trade jokingly. Sheila automatically sits with her back to the kitchen looking out at the pine grove. Those trees were little seedlings when they first bought the house. —They need to be thinned—she thinks—someone should take care of that— And then realizes that she's had the same thoughts almost every time she's sat there—years. —Well it won't be me now that does it. . . .

Marty's telling a story about school, rambling through people and buildings and places that are endless and unfamiliar to her. Then somehow Josh is talking about reptile collecting in Florida. Sheila feels absent, unconnected to it all, hearing them at a distance from herself as if they were a television program playing in another room. Some part of her is annoyed that they've shut her out so easily but underneath she's in a frozen panic, thinking—soon they're going to ask me. Soon. . . soon. . . .

Tom is still watching her, hasn't stopped since she came and when there's a pause he says loudly, "Well, now, tell us, what on earth are you doing in a place like Arkansas?" —As if it's Tibet or Hungary, as if only someone as crazy as Sheila would go there.

They're all looking at her. Now that the questioning's started she's actually relieved. "Just living there," she says as casually as she's able. "Everyone has to live some place and Arkansas is no stranger than anywhere else." They're still quiet, leaving her space to talk, not even eating. "I've rented a little house. I'm driving a bus for the E.O.A."

"You live by yourself?"

"I was for a while. That's what I thought I needed. Now I'm living with a woman named Nancy. We're in love with each other." It's been said, the words that can't be undone, irreversible, irretrievable, dropped like a rock on the table, humming, humming in the air around them. Into that reverberating silence she says quickly, "She's very sick. The doctors don't know what it is," and thinks–I'm throwing them Nancy's death like a bone, to keep the wolves from my throat. How shameful– She'd meant to say it all clearly and cleanly. But she's feeling calmer, steadier than she'd expected. When she can collect herself, she looks around from face to face, each arrested, silenced in personal surprise or embarrassment or confusion. What to say. . .?

"We've been to lots of doctors. She's getting worse." Judas, she tells herself, traitor, as if only some great tragedy could make their love forgivable. Is she a traitor for even being there alone? Would Nancy have come with her if she'd been well? Would Sheila have wanted her to?–Well, I'm not saying another word into this silence–she thinks stubbornly–I want to be out of this room, out, away from here, away from them all–in the pine grove or walking away down the road. But before she can actually move Josh says gently, "That must be very hard for you." He's watching her with concern. She realizes that only a few seconds have passed.

"I knew she was sick when we got together but it's still hard."

The others don't look at her. They focus on eating. Forks and knives against plates seem very loud. The food gets passed around several times. Finally Marty asks, "What were you doing in California?"

"Mostly learning to make films. There's a women's movie collective there called SkyFilms." She tells them movie stories and they're able to relax and look at her. She even gets them to laugh. But when she runs out of stories Tom says dryly, "Well, you didn't have to learn all that just to end up driving a bus."

Sheila feels the old anger rise in her, rise and subside like a breath. She looks right at him and laughs, "That's right. I didn't. That's not what I learned it for," and she's thinking–he's just where he was when I left, not changed at all. Thank heaven I'm not living with this man anymore– The sense of relief is so intense she blushes.

Tom doesn't ask her any more about her life that night but next morning he meets her in the doorway, a tight smile on his face. "I always wondered why sex was so rotten between us," he says in that

way she always hated and was so afraid of. "Now I
t that my wife was a little bit queer. Now I don't have
more that at it was me." He makes a grab for her arm but
. Absolution, he's found absolution for their whole
Before she would have had to argue with him, struggle,
t, try to fix the blame, the ever shifting, never quite fixed
she just says, "No, you don't have to worry," and think-
y she smiles with potent, secret warmth—maybe he's really
I've been there all the time. . . .

eps past him into the living room and is standing on her
's rug, in the middle of stiff traditional angular birds and
ing on it gives her a curious strength. "Our house is cold
o I need the rug now." When he starts to protest she says
ed it now— I plan to take it back on the plane with me."

, I don't have a whole lot to say to you. It was the boys'
to come— It certainly wasn't mine."

glad they wanted to see me."

be they're not so glad now. What kind of effect do you
going to have on them that their mother's a Lesbian?" He
t word almost with a hiss.

on't know Tom. That's going to be up to them." She walks
house, trying to keep herself centered. It's been said—the
been said. On the back porch she sees a plant she'd started
big now and overflowing the pot. —I'll take back some
tart a new one. I'll take back cuttings from all of them—
ly, like a thief. She could not bring herself to ask him for

y Mom, put on some boots and walk down to the pond
"

ing into the pond with Josh she sees him again as a little
tting over a puddle full of polywogs, his cupped hands filled
wiggly life. "Baby frogs, baby frobs." "Put them back
'll die." "But I want to take them home." The house was
of things that wriggled, crawled, squirmed, slithered and
dn't stay in their containers.

o you still like snakes?"

"I have a boa-constrictor in Florida. My roommate Joel is feeding it for me. How about you?"

"I still like them but I don't keep them anymore, I just pick them up to hold and let them go again. I guess I don't keep anything much anymore. Besides, Nancy's afraid of snakes."

"You just have to show her how nice they are." He says it playfully, in a child's voice. They both laugh. Once, long ago, they'd decided it would be their secret mission in the world to change people's fear of snakes. Feeling really close to him at that moment, she puts her hand on his arm.

"Mom, is it very different to be loving a woman?' Josh, over six feet tall and still the straightforward child, still in some way innocent.

She smiles at him. "It's gentler. There's less conflict at a root level. And for me right now there's shelter and comfort that I need, no put-downs. And I can be as open and loving as I want."

"I think I can understand that," he says dreamily. "It sounds nice for you."

"And I still love you all," she says quickly, "I haven't changed. I'm still the same person at the core." She reaches up tentatively to touch his face. But is it true? At the core she may be the same but for the rest she's shed her past life like the old snake skins they used to find together in the woods.

For the next day or so, talking to old friends and neighbors, she has a weird sense of dislocation, like putting on clothes that are ten years old. She goes to visit Marsha who lives down the road and it's a strain. It's always been easy between them. Now she feels distant and polite. Finally she says, "Marsha, I feel like my own ghost."

Marsha nods and says slowly, "And I don't think I know you anymore."

Telling the bare facts of her life tells nothing of its essence, its real meaning to her. It's as frustrating as trying to tell a dream by the fragments of remembered events and having no words, no vocabulary at all for that great spectrum of mood and emotion that are the real drama.

They're all invited to a party at the Beals. Sheila is particularly urged to come. Clarence Beal corners her in the kitchen. "Ho, ho, so you've been having a great time playing the middle-aged hippy these past two years and just left the rest of us here in our ruts. Bet you've had a lot of fine adventures along the way." He winks and puts his hand on her arm. She feels revolted and can't believe that she used to find this man slightly attractive and flirt with him at parties. Jack Tate appears over her shoulder. "Hey, I hear you're doing films in California. D'you work on. . .?"and he names three or four current films none of which she's seen or wants to. She shakes her head, smiling, smiling, more like a grimace. She feels them looming over her, repulsive and predatory. Smiling and shaking her head, she slips under Clarence's arm and backs away.

"Don't think she used to be so shy." They laugh together. They're amused by her. She's part of the evening's entertainment, that's why she was invited. She could probably tell them she was gay. They'd find that amusing too and still try to make out with her. Sheila has a quick flash of punching them both in the stomach, that sharp hard punch Lila taught her, seeing their faces turn red, their drinks splashed on the wall, seeing them slowly doubling forward together. . . . But she's more bored than angry, flat heavy boredom. Everything in this scene is stale, the jokes, the bragging, the flirtations– and the cigarette smoke is hurting her eyes.

She leaves early, walking up the familiar road in the dark, rubbing her arm where Clarence held it. –You should have just punched him out, she hears Margo saying. That man's a pig for sure. You should really have punched him out. . . .

He is and I should have. I'm just not ready yet. But maybe next time. –Then out loud to Margo, to the night, "Next time. . . next time. . . ."

She misses them so much, Lesbian sisters, women she can talk to. Being here in this foreign country she sees clearly that she's one of them. The stars bend over her in the cold air and she's wishing she were back in Arkansas. They probably all went out to Mindy's farm for Thanksgiving. She sees Mindy with no shirt on, her leather vest open to the fall cold, chopping wood, and Margo tossing it in the wood pile. If Taurus is there they'll play drums until late at night and maybe sit out by a fire. Sheila feels isolated, cut off – a plant without water.

She calls Nancy as soon as she gets to the house. The phone rings across all that space--our lives strung out on singing wires, she thinks, like a line from a poem--and then Nancy answers. Nancy's voice is right there in the room with her. Sheila's past and her future and Sheila with the charged connection between them in her hand. The phone seems almost too hot to hold.

Nancy sounds tired but cheerful. She's gotten a kitten, black and longhaired, for company. The roof leaked in another place, lots of rain, ". . . but I got the landlord to fix it--told him how sick I was and that you were away. Scared the old bastard. . . . Margo's living with a woman from Chicago. Terry and Linda have split up and Linda's going back to the west coast. And I've got an index here that's too big for me. Come home. I miss you." Behind the words there's a weariness.

"Soon, soon. . . I don't belong here anymore. I probably never did. I miss you, I love you."

When she hangs up the house seems tensely quiet around her, alien and waiting. She goes up to her old sewing room somehow expecting it to be the same, the things that need mending piled up in corners waiting for her, and the rest a litter of bright fabrics for making collages and quilted pillow covers. Sometimes all of them, even Josh, outgrew the shirts before she got to patching the elbows.

But it's all changed, the only room that has. Tom's made it into an office-study, male and orderly. All the soft brilliant clutter is gone, her designs taken down from the walls. She feels rebuked for intruding here and quickly shuts the door.

That night she sits up sweating from a dream. She remembers struggling to climb a stone wall with broken glass embedded in the top. Her hands are ripped and bleeding but she keeps trying. She has to. On the other side is a huge meeting of women, shouting in anger. Everything is permeated with fear. She knows she must get to the meeting but she can't climb the wall. She's terrified.

Even now, sitting up in the early gray light, that fear is with her in the room. She feels very alone, wraps her arm around herself and wishes for Nancy.

New Orleans--the dream is about New Orleans. There are walls

like that in the French Quarter for keeping out prowlers. She looks at her hands for blood. New Orleans and Bonnie saying, "I only have energy for my Lesbian sisters. Straight women can get support from men." Shut out by other women when she tried to be part of the struggle. That six months in New Orleans was the hardest time of Sheila's life. She wouldn't live through it again for anything. And she wouldn't trade it for the world. The first time she's ever felt another woman's flesh pressed against hers, hot and wanting, another woman's tongue in her mouth. Women loving and sitting in judgment and caught in the tides—women shouting at each other, screaming, a roaring chaos, everything going down, anger and tears, accusations so terrible they burn the air, even physical fights, the sisterhood she's just found ripped apart in bleeding shreds and Sheila's terrified vulnerable self running for shelter to a commune in the Arkansas hills, refugee from the women's wars, finding comfort with a softspoken bearded hippie. Living with women's rage, surviving it.... When she'd talked to Josh about loving women she hadn't mentioned New Orleans. She's still trying to come to terms with it herself.

"That was a time wasn't it?" Margo likes to laugh about it. They'd been there at the same time but hadn't met til later. "Shit, I thought somebody was going to get killed for sure. And you left before it really got hot." Margo loves to tell New Orleans stories, the worse the better, but always ends by saying, "But we all came together at the end. It was worth it."

Sitting up, hugging her knees, Sheila says to Bonnie's strong round face in the air before her—Well Bonnie, I'm a Lesbian now. I'm not a dyke yet but I am a Lesbian— It's the first time she's really been able to say that to herself. Bonnie had loved her and wanted her and been afraid of being betrayed by a "straight woman" and pushed her away. "Bonnie, Bonnie, good morning Bonnie, this is your sister up in a suburb of New York—our lives are strung out on singing wires— I have just this morning declared myself to be a Lesbian." —And thank you Clarence Beal—she rubs the spot on her arm where he held her— Not again. No, you won't put your hands on me again.... When she walks downstairs later she feels different, more solid.

Josh helps her roll up the rug and tie it like a long helpless body. It seems as if every piece of furniture in the room has at least one leg on it. They puff and struggle, laughing together.

"I feel funny taking it."

"Why should you? It's yours. Dad's going to grumble. So what? That's his way. You got little enough out of this house." That's true—little enough.

Marty's driving her to the airport so they can get a chance to talk alone, something he's been asking for. Before she leaves Tom calls her aside.

"I see you took the rug."

"I said I was going to."

"Look, I don't ever need to see you back here again. If you have any business with me you can do it by letter."

"That's fine by me, Tom. I don't fit here anymore. I have no reason to come back." The pond, the flowers she's planted around the house, the grove of pines in back—never is a long time but she wouldn't fly half way across the country for that anyhow, especially not with her finances. She's had to borrow most of the money from Charlotte to come this time. "The boys can come see me in Arkansas next time."

"If they still want to see you at all." He says it so fast, a quick cut. The old game, silent merciless dueling with no blood showing, hiding your hurt while you think of what to say that's hurtful—I'll never have to play this game with him again, she thinks. "It's up to them, Tom." No sign of feeling in her face or voice, the blood dripping inside. . . .

Sheila's glad she took the cuttings from the plants she grew, a living connection with her past self. They're safely wrapped in wet paper towels and tinfoil ready for their journey. Already she can feel Nancy's pleasure at seeing them growing on all the window sills.

She hugs Josh and keeps hugging him, afraid to let go and for a lurching moment it's a little boy she's hugging. Toby gives her a kiss on the cheek and a nod. Tom stands watching, silent in the doorway as they stuff the rug in the car.

On the way Marty talks about everything except what's on his mind but when they're almost at the airport he finally says, "I'm having a hard time accepting it, you being with a woman. It bangs into all my prejudices."

"I bet it does. Don't try accepting. Don't think about it so hard. Just let it be. I'm glad you could finally talk. I thought you were just going to pretend I hadn't said anything. It felt pretty weird. Look, I want you to understand that it took a lot of courage for me to tell you all, a lot of courage. I just want you to hear that. And if I hadn't told you then nothing else I said would have been real."

"Yeah, I guess that's true." He laughs, "Maybe I should be glad you have someone who loves you. Maybe that's how I'll think about it."

"That's a good way." She leans back relaxing and watches the airport sweep in around them.

When he has to leave Marty starts to give her a little kiss like Toby, then changes and hugs her tight.

"Mom?"

"Yes."

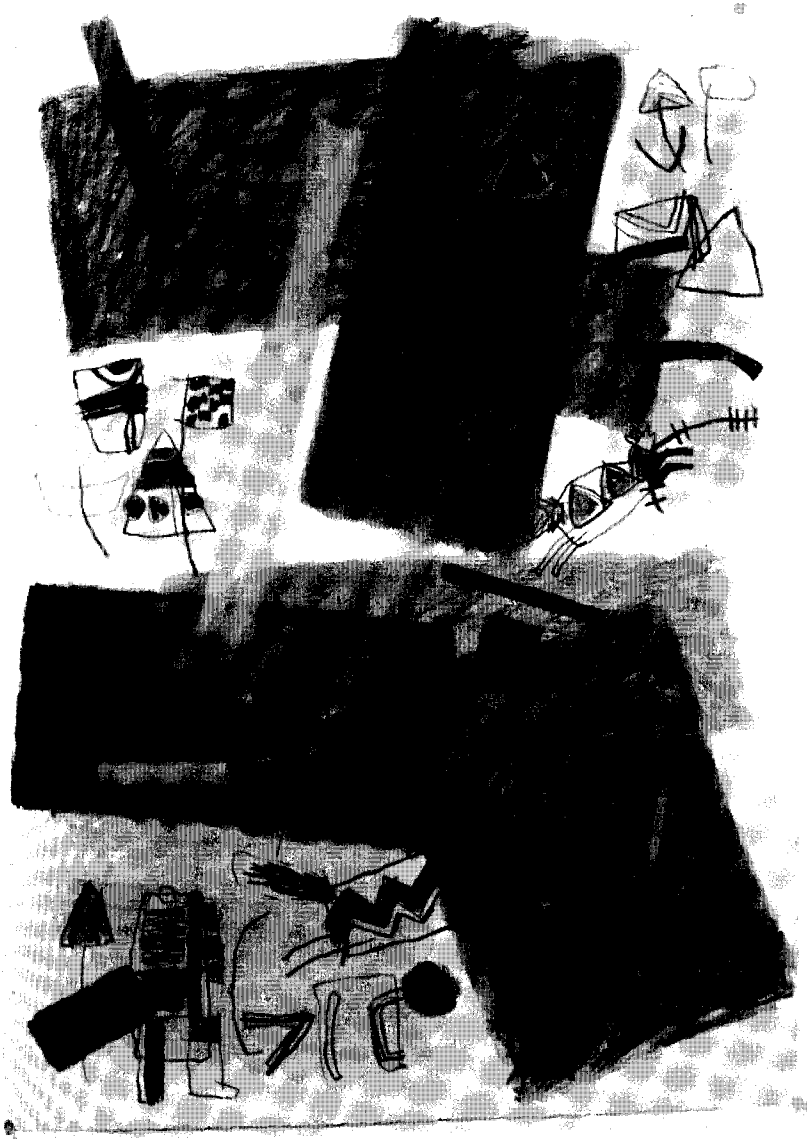
"Be happy."

Do it, do it, do it. She urges the plane forward and up, up with her will, up with mounting sexual excitement—then, airborne, she feels a soaring sense of relief and accomplishment, that absolute instant of transition, of not being any longer on the ground.

Immediately the familiar anticipation of disaster hits her. How many times and in how many ways has she seen the plane she's in come hurtling out of the sky, into the ocean, into snowy mountains, flaming into cities. She loves the takeoff but she's always relieved to get back from where she's been, safe at least for this time.

The plane tilts up, the city turning at a crazy angle below her, then flattens out over the clouds. Going home, her blood sings, going home. She feels stretched thin as if her very flesh were stretched out across that space. Somewhere, safe in the belly of that plane, is her grandmother's rug.

reviews



BECKY BIRTHA

LORRAINE HANSBERRY: ART OF THUNDER, VISION OF LIGHT edited by Jean Carey Bond. Special Issue of *Freedomways* (Vol. 19, No. 4, Fourth Quarter, 1979), 799 Broadway, New York, NY 10003. $2.50/issue; $4.50/year subscription.

In the editorial statement introducing this special issue of *Freedomways,* Jean Carey Bond, editor for this issue, presents objectives: "First, to introduce and, in some cases, reintroduce Hansberry. . . and secondly, to encourage attention to, and study of, a woman whose understanding and vision have enduring relevance, and whose artistry entitles her to inclusion among the best of contemporary American writers" (183).

I approached this collection with additional expectations. I wanted new information about this black woman who made a success of being a playwright at the unbelievable age of twenty-eight, in the less believable year of 1959, when *A Raisin in the Sun,* her first play, opened on Broadway.

I had learned, from her autobiographical last work, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black,* and the film based on it, that Hansberry was from a middle-class Chicago family, that she had dropped out of college and settled in New York's Greenwich Village, where she wrote for Paul Robeson's newspaper, *Freedom.* I knew that she was a civil rights activist as well as the author of several plays, before her death at the age of thirty-four. But what were the steps between being an unknown writer and having her work so widely accepted? What could a present-day black woman writer learn from her story?

Hansberry's death held questions for me, too, as does the early death of any woman writer. Although the nature of the disease made it seem unavoidable, I found the fact of Hansberry's death by cancer personally upsetting, frightening, and hard to reconcile. Much more frightening, and worthy of serious consideration by contemporary activists, is the proposal suggested here by Julian Mayfield in his essay "Lorraine Hansberry: A Woman for All Seasons" that Lorraine

Hansberry (and other outspoken black writers who also died of cancer in their thirties) may have been the victim of murder by the U.S. government.

Another question stirred my curiosity. I had heard intimations, from time to time, of Lorraine Hansberry's lesbianism, of her contributing work to *The Ladder.* I was curious to know if *Freedomways* might confirm or deny them and, if they were confirmed, how a lesbian identity might have affected her life and work. With this variety of questions, intentions, and expectations, I began to explore the collection of essays.

Art of Thunder, Vision of Light is a dense mixture of critical analysis, personal memoirs, quotations from Hansberry's writing, biography, and discussion of her life, literature, and politics. Included are sixteen short, readable essays and a sprinkling of briefer statements from some of the best known voices in the black political and literary communities. A bibliography of more than four hundred entries completes the collection.

The relationship between art and politics is a central question that is raised and explored in many of the essays. We learn that Hansberry, whose politics were strongly influenced by Marxist thought, and who used her reputation as a playwright to join civil rights leaders in the desegregation struggle, refused to make a separation between those politics and her art, asserting that: "The question is not whether one will make a social statement in one's work–but only what the statement will say. . ." ("Lorraine Hansberry: The Complete Feminist," 238).

Still, the question remains a hard one for the black artist, who is often beset with contradictory obligations, and who must answer not only to academia and/or "broadway," but to the black community, as well as to her own inner vision. Some members of Hansberry's community felt that she was not revolutionary enough. Her character Lena Younger, head of the family in *Raisin,* has been the victim of attacks on that mythical domain, The Black Matriarchy. In the interview-essay included here, "A Lorraine Hansberry Rap," it is a relief to hear Margaret G. Burroughs and Lerone Bennett, Jr. agree, not only on Lena's blamelessness, but in refuting the whole myth.

Jewell Handy Gresham turns around the question of obligations to ask, instead, what obligation academia has to the black artist. She

discusses the academic approach, deploring its neglect of the work of black writers, and proceeds to give selections of Hansberry's prose the kind of scholarly, critical attention they certainly deserve.

Hansberry's work has frequently been praised for its "universality." (*A Raisin in the Sun* has been translated into over thirty languages.) This, too, becomes a political issue, as Aishah Rahman, in her essay, "To Be Black, Female, and a Playwright," questions the value of universality. She asks, "How much 'truth' can the black playwright let *white* audiences see?" (259). I was struck by the implications of the discussions on this theme for lesbians as well.

While over half the essays are by men (feminist separatists be forewarned), I found only one of them offensive. Douglas Ward, writing on "the Passion of Walter Lee," perpetuates the nonsense that the conflicts of the male character are necessarily more significant than those of any female character. Ward goes so far as to suggest that Hansberry herself is somewhat misguided in allowing her female characters to devalue Walter Lee's struggle. Throughout the essay, Ward upholds that familiar, annoying assumption that the critic knows, better than the author, what she was really trying to do.

In an autobiographical prose piece, Hansberry wrote, "I was born black and a female" ("Lorraine Hansberry: The Complete Feminist," 236). Ever since Frances Watkins Harper and Sojourner Truth, black women have been expected to choose between these two sides. For me, the most significant issue raised in these essays is Hansberry's feminism, dealt with in depth in only two of them.

I found Margaret Wilkerson's "Lorraine Hansberry: The Complete Feminist" somewhat disappointing. Her attempts to prove Hansberry's feminism seem to reveal more of a humanist than a feminist, and fail to reveal either a feminist political analysis or a commitment to, and valuing of women (e.g., by writing plays in which they are the main characters).

However, the *quotes* Wilkerson uses imply that Hansberry may have been more of a feminist than Wilkerson cares to acknowledge. In one passage, as Hansberry suggests that the significance of her opinions stems from the fact that she *is* both female and black, we infer the beginnings of a black feminist critical approach. In another passage, Hansberry suggests that, in exploring ideal human capacities, much might be learned from woman, who "possesses the most magnificent features of the human race" (244).

But most enlightening is Adrienne Rich's "The Problem With Lorraine Hansberry." Rich makes it clear that Hansberry was "an early and lucid feminist" (250). The "problem," for Rich, is censorship. She discusses censorship by others, pointing out that most of what we know about the playwright is known through works edited posthumously by Hansberry's former husband, Robert Nemiroff, but adds: "I know from my own experience as a white, lesbian, feminist writer that the first–and last–censors are interior when we are writing in the face of that judgment and culture of white males, that cultural jury which presumes to set standards, to determine whose experience counts, which themes are 'universal'. . ., to define 'greatness' itself" (249).

Rich goes on to cite and quote from feminist essays written by Hansberry which were never published. For example, in an essay entitled "Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex:* An American Commentary 1957," Hansberry wrote: "The station of woman is hardly one that she would assume by choice, any more than men would. It must necessarily be imposed on her–by force. . . . A status not freely chosen or entered into by an individual or group is necessarily one of oppression. . ." (253). In 1959, no doubt referring to the oppression of black women, she said, "obviously the most oppressed of any oppressed group will be its women. . . . Obviously, since women, period are oppressed in society, and if you've got an oppressed group, they're *twice* oppressed" (251).

Besides the essay on de Beauvoir's book, Hansberry had planned to write a full-length play on the life of Mary Wollstonecraft. And Rich discloses the fact that the main characters in both *Les Blancs* and *The Sign In Sidney Brustein's Window* began, in Hansberry's notebooks, as women. Hansberry also contributed letters to the lesbian publication, *The Ladder,* in 1957, under the signatures L.H. and L.H.N.

Like many other contributors, Aishah Rahman and Demetria Brendan Royals, whose essays follow Rich's, confirm the impact that Hansberry has had on the succeeding generations of black artists, actors, and playwrights, appearing at a time when very few role models were available for black female writers. (I was reminded of my own astonishment, as a teenager, when I found out that *Raisin* had been written by a young woman.) Rahman's essay is unique in exposing the sexism that is still prevalent in male-dominated black theater, despite its debt to Hansberry.

The problem I found with this collection of essays was that they began to be very repetitive. Certainly issues such as the conflict between politics and art and the obligations of the black writer to her community must have recurred in Hansberry's life, too, but at times the essays seemed chosen not so much for *what* new insight was being presented, as for *who* was speaking. There was an overall tone of total acceptance, admiration, and adulation that began to be bland and soporific, and left me wondering if these people were really recognizing Hansberry as the radical and revolutionary that she was. Rich's essay was so noticeably different in tone that I was at first irritated by such a critical approach from a white writer, then disappointed that not more of the black contributors seemed able to risk making statements that might be considered controversial.

For example, there is very little information about Hansberry's marriage to Nemiroff, and how that may have affected her work. Rich tells us that Hansberry's letters to *The Ladder* discussed "the economic and psychological pressures that impel many conscious lesbians into marriage" (252). But no one seemed willing to expand on the subject, which might well prove controversial–not only around the issue of lesbianism, but also because the marriage was interracial.

My original quest for new information was left largely unfulfilled. Why is so much still unknown? I found that much of the material that interested me most was quoted from unpublished sources, and no full-length biography for adult readers has been written yet, though fifteen years have passed since Hansberry's death. *Art of Thunder* left me, with its editor, anticipating further attention and study, to reveal (hopefully) more than we already know; left me hoping, along with Adrienne Rich, that future criticism of Hansberry's work will go further towards helping us to see this incomparable artist "unidealized, unsimplified, in her fullest complexity, in her fullest political context" (254).

CATHERINE MADSEN

THE WANDERGROUND: STORIES OF THE HILL WOMEN by Sally Miller Gearhart. Persephone Press, P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, Mass. 02172. 1979. 196 pp. $5.00.

One of the perplexities of "women's culture"—which in practice seems to mean consciously feminist or lesbian/feminist creative work—is how to write hopefully about the future without oversimplifying the present. A writer can be strongly tempted to scrap the whole scenario of contemporary society and to try to build, from the ground up, a society that neither fears nor colonizes women. The trouble is that this kind of revisionism does nothing but reveal the writer's preconceptions, because what one woman thinks of as the "whole scenario"—and proposes as a woman-loving alternative—often ignores vast areas of culture that are essential to whole groups of other women. No one ever starts from the ground up: we all start with our own experience, with the parts of our own class and culture we like best. This isn't at all the same thing. "Experience" is the part of your life you can trust, the part you've been through; "the parts of our own class and culture that we like best" *can't* be trusted, because somebody is telling us to like them—they're part of somebody else's agenda for us.

Sally Gearhart's *The Wanderground* is a book that attempts this kind of radical rebuilding, and reveals some significant preconceptions in the process. Feminist reviewers in general have praised Gearhart's imagination, particularly her descriptions of psychic powers, new linguistic patterns, new modes of nurturance and healing, and the association of men with the city and women with the country. Julia Penelope (*Sinister Wisdom* 11) says "the stories. . . fed my fantasies, something I needed to have nourished"; Susanna J. Sturgis (*off our backs* 10:1) calls it "beautifully written"; Cheri Lesh (*Lesbian Tide* 9:4) says "Great literature? Certainly." None of these reviews has been wholly without criticism, but none of them has really examined the book's implications as a model for the future. In part, I see this review as a response to those that have already appeared. Since most fantasy literature (especially feminist) is on some level intended as a

model for the future, it is important to see what it does with the realities of its own day. While I enjoyed her story-telling powers and found some of her situations intriguing, I believe she has seriously oversimplified the ways women interact with each other and with nature, and has created an emotional landscape which ignores several important problems.

The Wanderground consists of twenty stories which Sally Gearhart wrote over a period of several years, arranged roughly in the order of their writing (in an interview in *off our backs* 10:1 she describes how some of the stories came to be written); some of the stories connect with each other, and some stand alone. They describe a world in which male power can operate only within cities; in the country men lose their potency, machines no longer function, and women and girls are free to live in harmony with nature. A few gay men, the Gentles, also live outside the city; a central conflict in the later stories is whether or not the women can look upon them as allies. The women have highly developed powers of telepathy and teleportation which take the place of technology to some extent, and a strong emotional network.

Gearhart's writing style emphasizes the commonality of the women's experiences. Significantly, everyone is either white or "dark-skinned," a physical attribute comparable in this book to having blue eyes. As a result Gearhart evades certain essential problems. Are the occasional dark-skinned women in the Wanderground women of color in terms of their culture and chosen identity? If so, do they experience racism from the white women? If all the women are white–with some having slightly darker skin than others–where *are* the women of color? (And where, too, are the men of color? Except for a Gentle with a Latin name, all of the men apparently are white.) Gearhart's failure to address these questions raises doubt about the Wanderground as a viable model for the future.

Individual characterization suffers also as a result of this emphasis on commonality. (I found it difficult to tell most of the characters apart except by name.) While Gearhart's writing devices are generally effective, they often make the action seem vague, as though it were being conducted by someone other than the characters, and occasionally credibility breaks down entirely. She frequently uses passive voice to describe altered states of consciousness: "Far below, anger was being spoken" (1); "There was a tightening of the bonds that hug the earth" (100). She uses numerous technical terms without explicitly defining them, perhaps to suggest that the women understand them

intuitively: "She's not in deep fallaway or in retrosense. We don't know what is wrong" (53). I was never able to read the recurring ritual of earthtouch (a long-distance union between women by means of a sacramental contact with the earth) without feeling it was silly—not because of its underlying meaning but because of the verbal exchange that follows it, of which this is one variant:

> "Fully given and well taken. Soon, Alaka."
> "Or deep, Evona," chanted Alaka.
> "Soon."
> "And deep."
> "Red waters."
> "Deep."
> "Deep."
> "Deep."
> "Deep."
> They spoke together. "Deep. Soon." (8-9)

I think Gearhart is trying to translate into a verbal formula an experience that might be better described without dialogue.

Her tendency toward formula also makes the women's psychic interchanges seem to me consistently impersonal. Everything has a name—mindstretch, softsense, care curls, presencing—and the women monitor the emotional tone of their encounters with such self-conscious goodwill that their observations often seem obvious and insincere. "You're about to move into murderous energy" (24), Alaka tells Seja, who is uncontrollably angry over another woman's rape. There is something of popular psychology here, something too generalized to be entirely spontaneous—the impulse to help *this woman* is translated into the impulse *to help*, and thus diffused. Only once does anyone rebel against the lack of spontaneity—the crusty but generous Egathese in "Sisterblood"—and Ono's response is instructive as a measure of how far this kind of nurturance can accommodate individual quirks:

> . . .she wrapped Egathese in the softest of pale yellows and oranges, breathed on her the pinkest of warm carings, and tried again to rouse the woman with the name.
>
> "Egathese."
>
> "Stop it," flooded back to her. "You're making me sick with that sticky mollycoddling. . . . Talk with me straight and clear. You are a hard woman yourself and not so young either. You do not need those sweet smell-

> ings any more than I do. I will move with you anytime you say and with any women you can name as fair-sisters for us. But stop pushing that mire of sweetness around me."
>
> Ono was not surprised. . . . The old woman didn't respond to anything but stiff straightness. For her, meanings lay always in the line or maybe in the mass, but never in their interplay. Even her mindstretches seemed sometimes to probe rather than to enfold. (36)

Ono is in effect accusing Egathese of male thinking, as though nurturance were never clear and bracing but invariably soft and pink. This seems to place rather drastic limitations on the women's emotions–almost as drastic as those of the stereotypical feminine role.

In general the women communicate psychically so much, and so easily, that their physical contact seems stunted and colorless. The female body, which the men hated and feared so much they had to enslave or eradicate it, becomes merely the "hardself"–a necessary vehicle for psychic exchanges, but never affirmed as seriously as it was threatened. The most physical scene in the book is a rape scene, and in one sense heterosexual: Ijeme, a Wanderground spy in the city, is sexually attacked by a prostitute who believes her to be a man. The prostitute's makeup and clothes, her age, her speech (consisting of "No," "Fuck, fuck, fuck!" and "Dyke, dyke, dyke!") are all described in painful detail (63-66); nowhere is there so thorough a description of one of the hill women or of lesbian lovemaking. It is as though the physical and emotional distinctions between the women are irrelevant–mindstretch transcends individuality.

This does not ring true to me as a resolution to women's suffering in misogynist societies. Far from melding into one warm and unified spirituality, women become more sharply *ourselves* as we learn to accept our bodies, and the patriarchal mind/body split becomes so patently false that some women would prefer not to communicate psychically at all, would insist on the body's reality and importance. Without that insistence certain essential problems are evaded: what do these women think about their bodies? How has the woman with large breasts learned not to feel ashamed, the small woman not to feel weak? To what extent do thin women still treat fat women with contempt? What has changed, and what has not, in this society?

Gearhart leaves similar questions unanswered about the women's relationship to animals and plants. She evidently intends to show

the women in a reciprocal relationship with nature, in which non-human life is valued as highly as the women value each other. This is fairly successful where animals are concerned: there are two striking scenes between women and wounded animals, one in "Sisterblood" where Ono poultices her dog's broken paws with her own blood retrieved from a past nosebleed, and the other in "Krueva and the Pony" where Krueva bargains with a cougar to leave a dying pony alone until she has helped it into death. But the women's communications with plants and inanimate objects are sometimes troubling. For instance: "In mutual mind effort from across the room [Alaka and Seja] enfolded the tea water, requesting it to boil, aiding it, with its consent, in doing so" (20); a tree willingly dries a woman's clothes and hair by "pneuma exchange" (13); "With a wrapping gesture of her hands she packaged [her tears] in a moss-covered seashell. . . and set them aside on a shelf of afternoon light" (38). Why? This is a different kind of manipulation of nature than patriarchal men have practiced, but it is manipulation all the same; and while it is always done with the nominal consent of the other, it cannot really be reciprocated. I find these passages genuinely disturbing: the women are getting something for nothing, as though nature is grateful to them simply for not being men. It is as undeserved as the extravagant gratitude women sometimes give to men who are mildly sympathetic to feminism. As long as the tea water and the tree require nothing of the women there is no equality between them.

What I think Gearhart has done here is assume that she *does not know* what nature would be like if it were freed from patriachal assault—that she has only wishful thinking to guide her in imagining what it could be like. Actually she, and all of us, know more about unviolated nature than we realize, nature being far more impervious to patriarchal assault than we are. Anyone who has ever been sunburned or frostbitten, anyone who has been through a fire or a flood, anyone who has ever killed a house plant knows one crucial fact about nature: she exists for her own purposes, which are not ours. If women reject what men have done to nature, we have a certain responsibility to let nature be what it will—and not to assume that it is friendly, or that it takes any special notice of us whatsoever. Mother Nature is virginal, and if she is also fecund it is not a gift but a dangerous and unfathomable balance: anybody who brought forth green beans *and* botulinus bacteria obviously doesn't care whether she kills us or not.

I think the strongest point of the book is Gearhart's presentation

of the moral dilemmas which the hill women face, and in these sections she becomes a thoughtful chronicler of lesbian-feminist political opinion. "The Gatherstretch" presents a dispute over separatism with such care that no woman's position is disparaged. In "Meeting the Gentles," the last story to be written, the women are confronted with gay men who have learned not to depend on them and who are developing their own psychic powers ("not an enfoldment but a bridge"), and the violent collision of the women's mistrust with the Gentles' pride is powerfully drawn. Gearhart comments (in the *off our backs* interview) that this latter story refused to be written until she risked the possibility that it might conflict with her politics. This, to me, is the mark of any writer's essential integrity—the unmistakable voice of the author's own truth, the emergence of a threatening and unanswerable question. The minute the fantasy becomes strong enough to hurt—*and not before*—it becomes strong enough to heal.

Sally Gearhart's firm grasp of the dynamics of meetings, with men or among women, is the product of a dozen years' political experience and the confidence that she knows what meetings do. Her blunders about emotional nourishment and the non-human world seem to come from a lack of confidence in what she knows, an impulse to overcompensate for all the knowledge that has been stripped from us. But that knowledge is available for the listening: like the mysteries of the seasons or the phases of the moon, it is an open secret in every generation, and one only needs the will and the persistence to discover it. What is discovered may or may not agree with one's conscious politics, but it will be the real purpose of political search and the only genuine "solution" any of us can offer to our sisters: one's own unanswerable question.

CHERRÍE MORAGA

TOP RANKING: A COLLECTION OF ARTICLES ON RACISM AND CLASSISM IN THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY, compiled by Joan Gibbs and Sara Bennett. February 3rd Press, 306 Lafayette Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11238. 1980. 148 pp. $3.50 (more if you can/less if you can't). Free to women in prison.

On the radio last night a Berkeley radio station—broadcasting fifty miles north into the living room where I lay on the floor with an old friend, a cup of hot cider, and the heat working—listed the atrocities. *Three Black families are being daily harassed by alleged KKK members in Pinole, California. Their homes are being guarded by the police around-the-clock. Four U.S. women, doing refugee relief work, were killed in San Salvador. Ronald Reagan announced yesterday that he does not believe that the so-called "human rights" struggles occurring in Latin America should have any effect in determining U.S. "interests" in the area.* Lying on the living room floor, the smell of fascism coming through the pipes, I recalled una compañera's words: "We must know how a lesbian life relates to the context of all life." *Top Ranking* is a collection of articles by lesbians which attempts to address itself to this essential issue.

By focusing specifically on the racial and class relations between and among lesbians—Black and white, middle-class and working-class—*Top Ranking* makes a case for the formation of a Radical Autonomous Lesbian Movement. As Joan Gibbs and Sara Bennett, the editors, describe it:

> . . . we see our liberation as lesbians as being tied to the liberation of all oppressed peoples and the total destruction of the present system. . . . While recognizing the need for unity among all oppressed peoples, we also feel that our complete liberation from our oppression as lesbians can only be ensured by building a strong lesbian movement. A movement, however, that not only targets heterosexism and sexism, the institution of the patriarchy, but also targets domestic colonialism, the roots of racism, and imperialism—all systems that oppress lesbians. (2)

This basic position is echoed throughout the entire book.

One of the most effective sections of the book should be credited to its editors. Their opening article in the collection places both race and class oppression within a historical context and provides a basis from which the racist and classist behavior and attitudes of many lesbians today can be viewed. In the article, the editors describe the function of capitalism in affecting race and class relations during slavery, the civil war, and the "reconstruction" period, laying the foundation for the trans-national proportions U.S. capitalism assumes today. We call it U.S. imperialism. It is a welcome relief to read something which in essence could be described as a "historical materialist" approach in language that is easy to understand. *Top Ranking* is a real educator in this sense. Further, the book contains some basic statistical information on the manifestations of racism in the prison system today, along with a definition of terms commonly used in any discussion of race. The book closes with a selected bibliography compiled by the editors.

Co-edited by a Black lesbian, Joan Gibbs, and a white lesbian, Sara Bennett, the articles in *Top Ranking* are written by both Black and white women. They range in form from personal chronicles and letters to highly analytical articles. At the risk of setting up a racial split in this review, I cannot ignore the basic difference in approach between the white and Black contributors. That is that when discussing racism—how it shows its face in our lives—the white contributors tend to write more theoretically and less personally. Conversely, over and over again, the Black women use their *experiences* in order to extrapolate a theory. The difference showed. I emphasize this because it is this phenomenon, using theory in the name of feelings, that permeates most "anti-racist" discussion by white women. And until these women start dealing from the heart, the racial split holds (and plenty of muddy water, at that). In speaking to this, I strongly suggest "Face-to-Face, Day-to-Day—Racism CR," guidelines put together by Tia Cross, Freada Klein, Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith, as a preliminary means for many women to emotionally come to terms with their racism. As they explain, consciousness raising "encourages the 'personal' change that makes political transformation and action possible" (65).

From an analytical perspective, I find Alison Colbert aka/Sarahgold's article, "The 'All Women's Interests Are the Same' Line: A Trap for Non-Privileged Women?" particularly informative. She does

a concise critical analysis of the roots of racism and classism in the "Radical Feminist Movement (1968-72)" (53). She states: "because white middle-class women have been oppressed as women *first,* we tend to assume *all* other women have been as well" (51).

Another article, by Carol Seajay, a white working-class woman, "The Class and the Closet," I feel can serve as a model to white women of how to write from the heart about one's own oppression and therefore help open that heart to oppression they do not immediately experience. In her story, Carol very sensitively depicts the kind of unraveling necessary for a feminist not experiencing color oppression to finally pierce beneath her skin privilege to the feelings of invisibility that are caused by the silence around class differences. Unfortunately, this piece, along with Sarahgold's, is one of the few articles that address class difference and oppression in any specific or concrete way. This is a serious drawback in a book whose title promises to cover racism *and* classism equally. To address racial oppression with little mention of how classism against people of color and whites cooperates with racism is to tell only half the story.

One of the strongest features of *Top Ranking* is its depiction of the myriad forms that racism takes. In a letter to *Chrysalis* about an article on *Gone with the Wind,* Minnie Bruce Pratt, a southerner, indicts the kind of white feminist criticism which reeks of white solipsism. She makes clear the need for a "revolutionary" feminism which, by definition, is actively anti-racist. Similarly, Audre Lorde presents an example of the best kind of feminist criticism which can be given to another feminist. In her "Open Letter to Mary Daly," Audre Lorde invites Mary Daly "to a joint clarification of some of the differences which lie between us as a black and a white woman" (88), differences which were brought to full view in some of the blatantly racist assumptions upon which *Gyn/Ecology* was based. Audre speaks to the common "outsiderhood" the two women know as lesbians in hopes of finally speaking to the difference, and at the same time, refuses assimilation in the name of feminism: "For then beyond sisterhood is still racism" (92).

Concerned about assimilation, Vickie M. Mays especially focuses on the relationships between and among Black women in her article entitled "Making Visible the Invisible: Some Notes on Racism and Women-Identified Relationships of Afro-American Women." She states: "While the Afro-American lesbian may adopt the predominantly white lesbian community as her support system, she does so at the

expense of an integration of her Blackness with her lesbianism, leaving her feeling fragmented and hungry for the type of emotional bonding she grew up with" (100). This theme of feeling forced to choose between your color and your sexuality is repeated by Black women throughout the book and is certainly a common concern among all Third World women, which causes us to feel alternately alienated, then crazy. In "Righteous Anger in 3 Parts: Racism in the Lesbian Community—One Black Lesbian's Perspective," Gwendolyn Weindling chronicles her personal experience working in the white-dominated lesbian movement. She describes how any kind of emotionalism on the part of Black women is considered "angry" and "intimidating" by white women. She puts it plainly: "I've come to understand *emotionalism* as being taboo in white 'cultures'—particularly white middle class or middle class identified cultures" (76). She goes on to say, "Sometimes it seems as if by defining myself I frighten everyone, White Wimmin, Black Men, the white patriarchy, and sometimes other Black sisters" (77).

Statements such as these by the Black women in the collection touch me very deeply. My major criticism of the book, however, is that it posits the issue of racism very specifically along Black/white lines. As a Latina lesbian, I find my concerns about cultural differences which are influenced by class completely ignored. There are virtually no articles by non-Black women of color. Seeing racism in Black-and-white terms can often mask the class and cultural differences among women of color. Color is such an all-pervasive oppression in this country, it is sometimes difficult even for women of color to see into ourselves for the more tangled roots to our oppression.

In *Top Ranking,* this Black/white grid is upheld by both Black and white contributors alike. Even in the opening article by the editors, the history of struggle against racism in the U.S. by other Third World peoples is given only peripheral acknowledgement. Also, I find it especially insulting when in a different article, a white woman, Karen Johanns, writes, "It's true we even push Black folks into joining the white on white anti-nuke movement. . .," a statement that basically ignores the fact that anti-nuclear struggle is a life-and-death concern for many Native American peoples in the Southwest whose homelands are being raped right before their eyes; the writer is clearly only addressing racial relations with Black people.

In concluding their opening article, the editors write: ". . . the most oppressed women's voices in this society must be heeded and

followed—as there can be no change without new directions. None while women are still oppressed" (35). In examining women's oppression then, we need to look very deeply to truly comprehend *many* elements contributing to our oppression and separation from other women. As the times grow more threatening, we must make alliances with plenty of strong hunches and quick intelligence, alliances which don't always fall into neat little categories of Black or white.

In introducing *Top Ranking* Joan Gibbs and Sara Bennett state:

> We decided to do this book because we felt that the ongoing discussions of racism and classism in the lesbian community are important, and saw the need for a book that would hopefully contribute to these discussions in a positive way.

I feel the editors could have more successfully accomplished the task of "contributing in a positive way" by taking a more active role as editors. They write: "we didn't edit the articles at all, except to correct what were clearly typographical errors." The role of an editor, as I see it, is to seek out and develop articles that will most closely reflect the vision and purpose of the book as a whole. There is no such thing as "unbiased" editing. And, the absence of any *real* editorial policy only contributes here to a two-sided picture of racism and a general submersion of class issues under race discussion.

We understand, particularly as Third World and working-class women, how "editing" has traditionally been used to white-wash, tone down, or clean-up our language and self-expression according to "their" standards. But it is time, as we so newly begin to have some access to our own publications, to proceed, for our own sakes, with the commitment to producing the richest and most comprehensive material possible.

Despite these criticisms, I do urge lesbians to get a hold of the book. I think it is a useful tool with which to begin exploring some of the issues which divide us.

BERNICE MENNIS

THE COMING OUT STORIES, edited by Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe. Persephone Press, P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, MA 02172. 1980. 251 pp. $6.95.

THE LESBIAN PATH, edited by Margaret Cruikshank. Angel Press, 171 Webster St., Monterey, CA 93940. 1980. 248 pp. $6.95.

The Lesbian Path and *The Coming Out Stories* emerge out of and seek to fill the need to tell and hear our stories, to speak about and listen to what is important in our lives, to break through the silence that suppresses and distorts our voices and denies us images that would validate and affirm our lesbian existences:

> We. . . offer [*The Coming Out Stories*] in the hope of unearthing our individual pasts and our common pasts, in the hope of bringing our lives to light at last. . . . We have been silent for too long; we have been silenced for too long.
>
> (Stanley and Wolfe, Introduction, xv)

> Remembering our isolation and believing that this book, if it had existed in the 1950's or 1960's, would have made our self-discoveries less painful, we are naturally eager to record something of our lives.
>
> (Cruikshank, Introduction)

The two anthologies of seventy-eight tales show us lesbians speaking in many diverse voices. They give us much nourishment. But words like "common past" and "our lives" raise the question of whose past, whose lives. Even with a very broad cross-section of the lesbian population—different classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions—generalizations would be dangerous. As lesbians and as women we have been defined by others, told who we were and what we felt. We had our own experiences and feelings ignored and denied. Given the fact that Third World lesbians are represented here in only a few selections; that poor and working-class lesbians and disabled lesbians, if they are present, are not visible as such; that lesbians who

are in the closet, afraid, ashamed, guilty. ... are still silent, the generalized "our" and "we" are especially dangerous. The patterns emerging from the tales *may* be true for many of us, but they may also be commonly shared assumptions that continue to ignore what many lesbians experience as real. The "we," therefore, must be seen as these women, in these tales, telling their stories about their realities.

Begun in 1976, completed in 1977, and finally published by Persephone Press in 1980, *The Coming Out Stories* collects forty-one personal narratives about a crucial moment in the life of most lesbians–their coming out. The tales begin:

> when she & i were 6
> we chased each other
>
> (Diane Stein, 11)

> Now, at age thirty-seven, I've been conscious of my Lesbianism for twenty-two years. I've been coming out all that time, creating myself, and I'm not finished yet.
>
> (Caryl B. Bentley, 79)

> Sitting down at the Employment Securities Commission, I'm getting ready to draw my pennies, having quit my job of ten years, my marriage, by sleeping with a woman last night.
>
> (Minnie Bruce Pratt, 149)

> a coming out story would be
> a chronicle of all the days of all my lives
>
> (Constance Faye, 176)

The conscious recognition of coming out means–for these women and for many of us–a coming home, a rebirth, a healing, an arrival, a feeling of integration and unity:

> I am born.
>
> (Minnie Bruce Pratt, 149)

> It was the most natural thing in the world. I wondered where I had been all my life, yet I did not regret one moment spent in arriving. To this day I wonder why it is not called, "coming home." For the first time I was at ease with being a woman, body and soul were united–healed. . . or was it, completed?
>
> (Sarah Lucia Hoagland, 147)

As I read, I saw the many paths taken on the way "home." What "they," the patriarchal world, sees as the highlights of our lives—marriage, children—from our coming out perspective might be seen as fear, attempts to conform, stumblings on our road to ourselves. I felt the honesty and the pain of the writers in attempting to understand what they felt then and what they feel now, where they lied to themselves and where they still lie, and why we block or hide what we know about our past and our present:

> I've been telling coming out stories for years—lots of us have, and mine were usually wry and funny. . . . Now I discover I've been lying, and selling my young self short. After twelve years I've at last reread the journals I wrote back then. . . . It confuses me now to find out that I wasn't nearly as naive as I'd remembered, that I knew I was a lesbian two years earlier than I'd remembered. . . . We know what we know, in spite of all the crazy myths about us, and often we act even more wisely than we know.
>
> (Judith Niemi, 36)

> I used to begin with my conscious recognition, at age twenty, that I could be sexually attracted to another womon. Since then I have realized that my Lesbian herstory starts much earlier than that, although I did not recognize it as such at the time. In this way even our own personal herstories are denied us, because we do not have the information to identify them for what they are.
>
> (Anonymous, 70)

Because the tales are all about "coming out," they have a unity and a power—a theme repeated in a choral chant. But the main problem in the book stems from the same source as its power: the repetition can become boring; stories merge; some sections are less focused and could be cut; some stories could be omitted without a real loss. Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan Wolfe made the editorial choice to accept all submissions and not to edit out any parts. After all the silencing and judgment from the outside world about what we can and should say, I understand why they made their choice. But there is a price in terms of focus and conciseness.

And there is a real problem in terms of organization. The editors arranged tales "very roughly" in terms of "processes involved in coming

out," but I detected no meaningful ordering. Perhaps, since much of what we experience is structured, confined and defined by the historical period in which we live, the region in which we grow up (rural/city, North/South), our class, color, ethnic background, etc., organizing a book around some of the more significant variables would make more clear some of the variations in our patterns—what was possible for whom, when, why. Statements like:

> The best we could do as wimmin was to be like men, since we had not yet learned of wominstrength and wominpower. Butch/femme role definition in the Lesbian culture around me was very important.
>
> (Merril, 136)

show the need for an historical understanding. Our personal histories are acted out in the context of our society.

In all the tales I felt the pressure of the outside world, imposing its negative judgments. But the stories don't provide that external information (time period, class, place) that might have helped me better understand some of the patterns within the patterns.

The Lesbian Path, conceived in 1975 and published in 1980, supplies some of the "outside world" missing from *The Coming Out Stories.* In the thirty-seven personal narratives, we see that lesbians are, indeed, everywhere: in high schools, in seminaries, in convents, at Skidmore College, in jail, in mental hospitals, in Wyoming, in Harlem, at the Telephone Company, at a McCarthy hearing, at the Michigan Women's Festival, on farms, getting married, getting arrested, drinking, canoeing down a river, writing, loving, living their many lives.

Margaret Cruikshank organizes her tales under different categories: Young Lesbians, Finding Ourselves, Catholic Tales, Struggles, Lesbians and Literature, Mothers, Public Lives, Adventure. Although some of the categories overlap, some are less meaningful as distinctions (e.g., all our lives are struggles), and some seem arbitrary and artificial, they still help us see certain connections, remember specific stories, and locate what we want. Each section begins with a general statement about the topic, some specific comments about each tale, cross references to other tales in other sections, and referrals to other books containing similar material. The introductions to the sections and the brief biographies at the end are helpful.

Although there is some development in the arrangement of tales—

"Young Lesbians" is an appropriate beginning and "Adventures" is an effective ending–*Lesbian Path,* like *The Coming Out Stories,* is more a patchwork quilt than a developed edifice. The words are there; the tales are all laid out. We, as readers, can view the whole, pick out the different pieces, hear what we need, be moved by what touches our heart.

The selections in *Lesbian Path* show, again, different prices some of us must pay for the lives we choose to lead: mental hospitals, jails, loss of jobs, objectification, loss of love of our family and friends, loss of approval, loss of the "security" of marriage, separation from and/or loss of children. With all the attacks, we sometimes also lose each other:

> And now I see our relationship crumbling. While declaring our personal life has strengthened our pride and belief in ourselves, Annie and I have also felt its harmful effects. We are growing apart and although our political activism is not solely responsible, it has undoubtedly played a big part.
>
> (Mitzi Simmons, 23-24)

> And now the fear about the children has frozen that lovely, sensuous feeling that I had first for S. She feels that; she is afraid of sex with me. I am too coldly separate, like a dead woman, or too angry, burning up myself and anyone near me.
>
> (Minnie Bruce Pratt, 160-161)

But from the many tales, it becomes clear that our losses are deeply connected to our gains. Despite every effort by the mainstream "culture" to tell us that we do not, cannot, should not feel what we feel, we feel it, we know it:

> While I try to introduce myself to you, I am distracted by a cacophony of internal voices bickering, interrupting with *their* versions of my story. . . .
>
> .....
>
> I have listened to you long enough. I am trying to hear my own voice–sometimes weak as a whisper, breaking with tears, stuttering with ambivalence and fear, hoarsening with anger.
>
> Still, I am determined to introduce myself to you

as a loving woman. Of course the damned voices continue their static. . . .

(Ida VSW Red, 70)

It is not surprising that many of us, as some of the tales show, suppress our own voices, keep ourselves down with alcohol, feel fear and confusion. The amazing thing is that despite that "cacophony of voices," we can still hear our own, that despite our knowledge of what we will lose, many of us still choose to follow our path, to choose our lives. That is what makes our personal lives, in their very nature, political. Our declaration of being is an act of rebellion, of courage, of strength. The two anthologies document that victory:

It is the price I chose to pay for me, my sanity and my freedom.

(*Path,* DPat Mattie, 175)

I realize, with the benefit of hindsight, that I spent thirty years of my life wavering between the false security of marriage promised to me by the patriarchy and my own identity as a womyn. The path has not been smooth. Nor will the path I have now chosen be an easy one--but I have chosen.

(*The Coming Out Stories,* Susan J. Wolfe, 251)

In both anthologies the presence of white, middle-class women, academics, writers, and, in *The Lesbian Path,* former nuns and Catholics, is strongly felt. While giving voice to many of our lives, in their failure to represent the diversity of our population, they perpetuate destructive silences. As if to excuse the omission of all but two selections by lesbians of color, Stanley and Wolfe mention requesting contributions from some Third World lesbians. In an interview in *Sojourner* (August, 1980), Cruikshank talks about the "racist attitudes of women like me" and the need to "do better in the future." But by the date of publication of both works, many articles, poems, stories by lesbians of color were available. Why were they not selected and included or solicited from different women and groups? And why didn't the editors go to the homes, streets, workplaces, bars. . . to tape words of women who might feel uncomfortable with the written word and who would never submit a cassette (Wolfe and Stanley offered to accept cassettes as well as written tales) because they never heard the call or, even if they had, might need to be persuaded that their lives are significant and worthy of recording? Editing (and publishing) such anthologies re-

quires active, not passive, responsibility for gathering our many voices, for searching out what is hidden.

The limitation in the voices means that we don't hear certain realities. Economic survival and its role in our decisions is hardly mentioned. How is the decision to come out—on the job, to parents, to friends—influenced by economic class? Culture? Color? Is marriage an economic necessity for some? How is racism expressed in the lesbian community? What other forms of isolation do working-class women, poor women, women of color, Jewish women feel within the lesbian community? What are some of the problems in interracial relationships? Interclass relationships? What are the specific problems that an older lesbian or a physically disabled lesbian experiences? The anthologies are not about these issues. But had the selections been more diverse more of these questions would have emerged.

And the issues will come up; they already have. After the first telling of our tales and the recognition of some common bonds, there is the realization of real differences. It's another book, or many books, but after the tales (which bear telling again and again), there is the dialogue. As Cherríe Moraga Lawrence, one of the two lesbians of color contributing to *The Coming Out Stories,* says in writing about racism within the women's/lesbian movement:

> I feel the necessity for dialogue. . . . It is essential that radical feminists confront their fear of and resistance to each other, because without this, there *will* be no bread on the table. Simply, we will not survive. . . . The real power, as you and I well know, is collective. I can't afford to be afraid of you, nor you of me. If it takes head-on collisions, let's do it: this polite timidity is killing us. (194)

We must hear all our lesbian voices, all our tales, and open to the lessons and the truths they teach.

LYNNE REYNOLDS

THE BLACK AND WHITE OF IT, by Ann Allen Shockley.

The Naiad Press, Inc., P.O. Box 10543, Tallahassee, FL 32302.
1980. 103 pp. $5.95 + 15% p/h.

Ann Allen Shockley's voice has sounded in a place where there have been few others to echo it—within the realm of black lesbians who are writing fiction, a small circle within a small circle. Her voice had been heard in that spare terrain before when she gave us *Loving Her*, an unprecedented novel about the love relationship between a black woman and a white woman.

Because it is one of the first collections of short stories about lesbians by a black writer, the importance of *The Black and White of It* should not be underestimated by lesbians of color or white lesbians. We are in need of voices of every timbre, range and accent to tell our stories. As Third World lesbians we have an acute need for writing that depicts the nuances of our own particular experiences. At the same time, the very scarcity of literature by black lesbians creates a need for everything to appear exemplary. Few works can survive the kind of intense scrutiny that is, I think, an understandable outgrowth of so great a set of expectations. It has taken me a peculiar and sustained effort to recognize what is actually before me as opposed to what I might prefer were there. The self-analysis and sifting of motives that a fair appraisal of this book demands has made it very hard for me to write about these stories. It has at times been a pain-filled and arduous process that is as much about being able to read these pieces for what is in them as it is about being aware of and sensitive to the various situations out of which they emerge.

As a black lesbian I need to affirm my experience as such, need to see a reflection of my own life and the lives of friends and acquaintances, of women about whom I have only heard, of women about whom I can only guess. It is not in the particulars that this identification is sought, of course; however, I expected to encounter in Shockley's stories some degree of the universality that binds us together, friend to friend, friend to stranger, and stranger to stranger as lesbians of color. I cannot make that identification with the characters in the stories of *The Black and White of It.*

As a black lesbian writer, I have had an even greater difficulty coming to terms with this book. I unashamedly look for inspiration in the writing of others like myself, having a true sense of them as my literary mothers and sisters. They provide points of reference for me and consequently I feel myself as seriously invested in their efforts to communicate their experiences and perceptions as I am in my own. I claim in equal parts their triumphs and their shortcomings. For those reasons I cannot easily disengage from the writing in *The Black and White of It* to provide a model of even-handed criticism and dispassionate observation. I have tried instead to substitute frankness where I could have more easily equivocated.

The stories in *The Black and White of It* introduce the reader to ten couples in various states of relating to one another. There is one heterosexual pair among them. The women depicted are both black and white (in same-race couples and racially mixed pairs), young and middle-aged, professional, student and working-class.

The ten stories about them are written as if according to formula. Within a couple of paragraphs the reader is introduced to the main character(s); a subsequent paragraph establishes their ages, professional status, and usually some family background and/or education. The reader is led into the action of the story, made aware of the central conflict, and then moved forward toward a resolution. There is nothing inherently wrong with this method of advancing a story; however, used repeatedly as it has been in this collection, it creates the impression that the stories have not been clearly differentiated each from the other.

I was surprised to find the stories seemed remarkably flat. Potentially volatile interactions never fulfilled my anticipated reaction to them. I don't think that the author has communicated successfully the essential, underlying tension that exists between people in circumstances like those she has created. The aftermath of a lover's death, a clandestine meeting with a married lover, a politician's attempt to preserve her heterosexual facade, the taking of a young lover by a middle-aged woman after the demise of a long-lasting relationship, the first meeting of a white woman with her black lover's family—these are not neutral occurrences. They carry a tremendous emotional charge; yet as they are written by Ann Shockley, the stories barely engaged my imagination, except to make me wonder why they fail to do that.

There is one three-page story that I thought of as the singularly

effective example of short-story writing in this book, "Love Motion." It traces the lesbian fantasy evoked by a woman to transcend the unpleasant experience of being made love to by her husband. The language in the story is spare, the details are relatively few, and the power in it is considerable. What it possesses in greater measure than any of the other stories is vitality and dynamic tension, relating just how thoroughly two people can occupy separate levels of consciousness while living the same event. It is a story about isolation, survival, and hope. It occurred to me that perhaps the reason "Love Motion" is effective where the other stories are not has something to do with its brevity. The strength of the story doesn't have a chance to diffuse itself over a number of pages; the essence is not diluted by the story's end.

When I first read *The Black and White of It* I felt puzzled and somewhat angry because Ann Shockley's characters seemed to me to have been drawn from a two-dimensional universe, inhabiting a world charged with negativism. From one story to the next the author seemed intent on conveying lesbian life as difficult at best and often painful. In keeping with the generally low level of awareness and self-acceptance of the characters in them, six of the book's ten stories feature at least one character who has chosen to hide or deny her lesbianism:

> She was only *bi*-sexual, which was better, more normal, half-way sane.
>
> ("The Play," 45)

> "Have *we* come out to our colleagues, friends–students?"
>
> "For what? To become ostracized? It's bad enough being looked upon as lepers by whites, let alone blacks. You know how blacks feel about–*bulldaggers*."
>
> ("A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters," 62)

> She had to cut this conversation off. Get rid of her. Adrienne couldn't come back into her life *now*. She was that part to forget, keep as contained and secretive as possible.
>
> ("Holly Craft Isn't Gay," 70)

Choosing "the life" exacts a high cost from nearly all the women in this collection. At the low end the coin is paid in anxiety and apprehension, as in "A Special Evening":

She couldn't afford to misjudge. She had been hurt before. . . . She couldn't afford to make any more mistakes. She was getting older. She had learned from the mistakes of the past—only a few—but enough. Enough to have left a bottomless reservoir of hurt inside her brimming with the painful words: *I'm not like that.* (99)

A number of the stories describe a peculiarly bleak atmosphere and characters or situations dominated by passive acceptance and resignation. Shockley's own words reflect this:

But if crumbs were all she would have, then crumbs she would take. . . . She would have to wait until another Saturday night came around.

("One More Saturday Night Around," 86)

Penelope felt a sunken abyss within her gorged with sadness. Watching them she wished it could have been different, knowing it could not.

("Spring Into Autumn," 23)

She could wait, for wasn't waiting and wishing and hoping the vine of life—in the life?

("A Special Evening," 103)

Part of my problem with these stories is that they seem terribly out of balance. There is, in most of them, a dearth of positive feeling which might have offset the absolute profusion of anguish, distress, and painful awarenesses that comprise the predominant emotional themes throughout this book. The narrowness of this scope makes it hard for me to place Shockley's characters in the world.

I thought that the recurrence of the themes of closetedness, the pervasive use of alcohol in almost all of the stories' personal and social interchanges, the subtle role-playing and overall atmosphere of despair, described elements of a not-altogether contemporary time sense; that they were remnants of what I think of as a strong nineteen-fifties outlook. I wondered why two of the most highly visible and vocal social movements of the past decade and a half—lesbian and gay liberation and the women's movement—seemed to have no discernible impact upon the dispositions of either the characters or the outcomes of these stories. The idea that there are alternative modes of behavior and thought besides the societally prescribed ones, which might be viewed as the greatest contribution of both of these movements, is

absent from the motives of the women in these stories. Their choices are none other than the most obvious ones or the most severely restricted, which is of course a valid theme to build a story upon; but what disturbs me is the consistency with which this lack of choice is exploited. For me it points to either a lack of thematic or creative imagination or a world view that is painfully negative. It seems that of the many decisions that might be influenced by one's lesbianism, most of those need not be limited because of it. That limitation is what I consistently encounter in Ann Shockley's stories.

The characterizations, as Ann Shockley has drawn them, are shadowy and insubstantial. The reader is (perpetually) awash in details: what cars are driven, the brand of alcohol consumed, the type of clothing worn. Yet none of those features alters my perception of her characters as little more than silhouettes–intricate paper cutouts, with the hand holding the scissors very much in view.

If one steers away from stereotypes and attempts to portray people in a manner that makes them accessible to a reader, the matter of differentiating even between black and white is not easily accomplished. Having characters slip in and out of black speech, make reference to the church, reiterate that black lesbians are thought of as "bulldaggers" and/or "lepers" by the black community, or occupy a spectrum of colors from peach to ebony does not make them black, as far as I am concerned. It tags them (like so many objects on a flea market table). These details occur to me as further details painting the surface of these stories but not coloring the deeper places out of which they should be drawn. They seem to be fragments of something that should be *the essence* of what is at times an entirely different set of comprehensions and encounters of and in the world, those of blackness. Once again, there is something missing. In that way the black characters are treated exactly like their white counterparts in these stories.

Three of the six stories having black characters in *The Black and White of It* in some way address attitudes held within the black community about race and homophobia. In two of these, lesbianism becomes the negative focus of a dispute which began with the discussion of race. In "Play It But Don't Say It" the argument between Mattie, the black Congresswoman, and her lover begins with this discussion of white lesbians:

> "Coming out of the closet is more significant to white lesbians. . . . We black women in our struggle against

racism planted the seeds for the white women's movement. Now, I guess, it's time for *them* to do *us* a favor. Liberate the so-called sex-crazy black woman from her own hang-ups." (36)

The argument ends with a furious Mattie striking Alice, who has just stated that Mattie's lesbianism is well known. Roz, in "Home to Meet the Folks," comes out to her family in the course of defending her white lover, Marge, from the malicious comments of her sister-in-law. She is prodded by these words and the threat by her brother of violence against her lover if Marge lays a hand on his sister:

"Why in hell do you want to live with a *honky*? . . ."
"Frankly, *I* don't think *any* white person can be a friend. . . ."
"Maybe she's funny. White women are really into that now, I hear. With this women's liberation crap going on—" (56)

The link is made between black hostility toward whites and lesbianism here; so a black, heterosexual female character argues that lesbianism is:

". . . Caused by *white* pollution. . . It's a white trick for black genocide." (57)

The third story dealing with race and lesbianism is "A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters." Lettie and Patrice, two black lesbians who are lovers, decide to attend one of the Sapphic Daughters' meetings to try to find other black lesbians. They don't find any others, but do encounter racist attitudes and are insulted by one of the group's members, causing Lettie to think to herself:

You goddamn racist! . . . White racists and black militants don't mix, and white lesbians and black lesbians are white and black people first, instilled with personal backgrounds of distrust and hostilities. (67)

Though somewhat awkwardly expressed, this thought is central to the much-needed dialogue that must go on between white women and black women of the lesbian community, if in fact we are to have something that could be considered a "community." The impact of this story was rather unfortunately undermined by an obvious set-up: they came (expecting little), they saw (no more than they expected), they departed (opinions intact). I could not help but wonder what this story might have been if it had been written with more subtlety.

In the end I must consider what it is that I came to find in this book and what it is that I came away with. What I brought to the idea of reviewing *The Black and White of It* was a willingness to connect with it, to look at and beneath the words in it in order to find an affinity with the writer that Ann Allen Shockley is. I cannot claim success, and believe that at least partially I am responsible for not having been able to allow for the distance between us as women with some experiences and insights in common. I came away from this review with the renewed hope that there be in the future much more writing done by as many of the diverse members of our community as exist, the old and young of us, the accomplished and the neophytes among us, and the black and white of us.

WE SPEAK IN CODE, Poems and Other Writings by Melanie Kaye; Visual Art by Paula King, Michele Goodman and Lee Pickett. Motheroot Publications, Inc. 214 Dewey Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15218. 1980. 108 pp. $4.75 + .50 p/h.

We Speak in Code is about conspiracy and the acts of conspirators. About survival and the acts of survivors. About the love of women and about women as lovers. It is about the day-to-day violence which threatens the lives of all women, which makes our day-to-day existence a series of heroic acts. This poetry is intent on naming and intent on speaking the truth. It is political in the finest sense; and there are cracks in the surface where these words have gone.

The book includes an introductory essay, "On Being a Lesbian Feminist Artist," in which Melanie Kaye explains her coming-into-speech, a process many of us in the feminist and lesbian/feminist movement have shared. The recognition of other voices. The necessity of connection with other women's lives and voices, past and present. The danger in this new-found and newly forged community of a slide into hierarchy:

> The danger is that the space which allowed me and many of us to become writers has been enclosed, filled, and made inaccessible to new women, except through an old-girls network of workshops and who-one-knows. We all have stories, they should be told. . . . Moreover, by connecting with women whose experiences have not been voiced, or voiced rarely, we expand who *we* are, not only enlarging our private understanding of women's experience, but enlarging the community of women makers so that our experience is more fully, more accurately, named, explored, and known. (10-11)

I think of this last point with regard to white women hearing the voices of black women; the seeming inability of many white women to realize that the experiences and the tellings of black women are intrinsic to their lives—that issues like *Conditions: Five* or *Heresies 8*

are tools for their survival as well as tools for the survival of black women. Only by expanding our circle of voices, of knowledge, can this movement, and our work, continue to exist. This is an important beginning to Melanie Kaye's book, for it states the purpose of her poetry and provides a personal and political context for her words.

The introductory essay is preceded by a poem, "Survival Is an Act of Resistance." "Survival" details the first recognition, the first conversations with another woman, the first experiences with another woman's body; it asks the question: *"who is the subject?"* (4)–to which the entire book is a response. We are the subject. Dessie Woods is. Cassandra is. Tillie Olsen is. Mary Moody Emerson is. Melanie Kaye is. Her grandmothers, mother, sister are. The poem concludes:

> speak what you know: you are
> an edge to balance,
> one cell of the planet
> and also the planet's eye
> also the woman who learns
> how to season and stir
> on one foot.
> and dance.
> sometimes the ground is not firm
> sometimes no one
> has stood on this ground before. (4)

Part One of the book, "Jewish Food," begins with "Rituals: one," in which the poet speaks in the voice of an ancestor, a woman who demands that the traditions be passed woman-to-woman. It is about the necessity of welding a historical continuity to our lives:

> Your blood calls for guidance
> we are its source
> we demand
> union. Look–
> we bring you bones.
> They are maps
> but heavier. Take them. (16)

The image of bones recurs throughout these poems. Bones as the basis of structure. The source of knowledge, flesh stripped away. The link with the past. The source also of sustenance, the guardian of the future:

On the fire
inside the bone-cage
unborn eggs
simmer

("My Nana's Nana Made Chicken Soup," 17)

There are the "bird-bones" of the poet's grandmother in "And Why Aren't You Talking about Me, Helen, Your Grandmother?" But it is now

—too late for questions, your brain
locked. Blood
can't get through

your blue as a girl's eyes
flatten, track ghosts
back of my shoulder

words are gone (19)

This woman chose independent passage from the shtetl, at sixteen. Took a lover. Was an ambulance driver. Buried a son and a husband. Danced at Roseland. Drank. Her story is told through "A few stories my mother told me," and the memory of Melanie Kaye's own body.

Now when you dance in the road
we come after you; when you sneak out the back
we track you, find you
rib-deep in the river, eyes trapped. (21)

"Rib-deep"—again bones—this time as limit.

Most of the poems in Part One deal with the poet's direct past. "Brooklyn 1956: The Walls Are Full of Noise" is about existence in the enforced proximity of an apartment house, the lives of the inhabitants bound by the need for water:

We are 6-D and water comes last to us,
showers are risky, I pop out red and soapy
when anyone turns on cold. If I howl
they hear it in 5-D where Mrs. Hirsch
uses our water up. Mrs. Hirsch
is divorced, dyes her hair black.
She and her daughter Paulette shriek
I HATE YOU at 2 in the morning. (24)

For those of us who have lived among people, in cities, where we hear

women shriek at each other at 2 A.M., men and women doing battle, wives and children being beaten; or where there is a "peeping Tom" we know by sight: " 'Hey Tom, nice of you/to see us again,'/we shout back/across the deep alley." (25)—these words ring with truth about our lives. In "City Indoors" (26) a child is being beaten. The father, "young bearded hippie out of work," screams and turns on a rock station. There are these and other sounds. The stereophonic violence of daily city life: "and i in my apartment alone, quiet, asking/ for quiet, remember sounds of a family banging around 4 small/ rooms" (26)—this extraordinary knowledge of other people's pain reminds us of our own pain, and our need for quiet, a private space around us. And with enforced proximity comes also enforced isolation.

> next door the chinese man with a grey crewcut hangs to dry bundles of herbs, unfamiliar. On the street he won't speak to me but through the window we smile and wave. somewhere people smile and wave not only through windows, these are not empty gestures, no one beats the children, and the wounds are minimal, minimal bleeding (26)

Most of us have heard, by now, the theory that it is the daughters of "ethnic" families with a tradition of filling plates who are the victims of anorexia nervosa. In "Jewish Food: a process" (31-33), Melanie Kaye uses the commonplace of ethnic, specifically Jewish, specifically her own, eating and overeating as a powerful metaphor. She speaks of "the need to eat, as in a panic" (31). And she connects this addiction to present and past history:

> somewhere people are starving.
> this has something to do with my cheese sandwich.
> somewhere in poland in the camps
> my greatgrandparents, uncles and aunts
> went crazy, pulsing need,
> dreaming of soup with pieces of real meat,
> plotting for bread, sugar
> anything for chocolate—
> . . . . . .
> I will not feel guilty
> for not starving (32)

The hunger for food. The false hunger for food, after the body has been satisfied, masking other hungers. But the hunger for food is one of the only hungers the powerless may be empowered to act on. We are still hungry because our real hunger is for that which will abolish other hungers. The poet pledges:

to use myself
against those who keep us bloated,
estranged from each other, hungry
for power to feed ourselves (33)

The other sections of the book—"Living with Chaos," "Naming," and "We Speak in Code"—are an opening-out, a movement from the poet's direct past, of city life, Jewish life, a circle of ancestors and female relations, to an ever-enlarging vision of female experience and politics. Central to this vision is the naming of the violent conditions of female existence:

At night my sister and I
stretch over a bed by the window,
watching. Each man
who walks through the dark heat
in a thin shirt, twirling his keychain, might
be a rapist, wife-beater, killer.
We make what are called
sick jokes: maybe
Son of Sam is Andy's
brother, killing the woman who finally
left, or Sara's husband, or
our uncle, screaming
as he screamed at his sister, *you little*
slut, you whore

If the Sons of Sam feed at our table
whose daughters are we?

("August, 1977," 82-83)

We are the daughters of Lilith (who "refused to lie under him"), Judith (who "lopped off his head"), Clytemnestra (who "stabbed him, for killing their daughter"), Procne (who "fed him children in a pie, for raping her sister"), Penthesilea (who "made war") (83). But under our conditions of existence we do not dream of these women, we dream of the violence done to women by men. This violence obsesses us, forces us to refocus our energies in a constant attempt to survive.

One tool for this survival is to hear the voices of other women, the details of our past, seeking through what "they" have written about us and writing our own record:

A woman who listens to women
is always crazy.

A woman who winds the threads
of women's whispers
does not expect good reviews.

She speaks to women.
She says, *listen.*
In our mother's house we feel safe
but the winds blow through us
blood marks the time of exile
in the father's kingdom, we
fetch a price. The men
rush about madly, roaring
into the faces of other men.
Their faces
blur into each other's faces–
father/ husband/ captor–
why should we care?
Even our sons are theirs
brought home to us broken
bleeding into clothing we wove
with able hands
too late for our protection–
we have only each other to save.

("Cassandra," 70)

To accept the fact that we are hated. To understand that only by seeking the depth of our oppression can we reach a knowledge of liberation. To recognize that this is a history that we must write– these are some of the subjects of *We Speak in Code.* And along with this goes the truth of the connections we forge with each other:

. . . when
i touch you, i know that touch
as my own skin. i look

for a name to the dark stirring–
more precise than desire
more compelling than the pacific ocean which

last weekend barely compelled us out of the room
while the sea was only roaring
or cradle, where we once rocked

into breathing, for each other's taste

("Since We Are After All Animals," 53)

And "sometimes no one/ has stood on this ground before." In the poems

"Trust" and "When You Won't Fight Back," Melanie Kaye speaks of the difficulties of our powerful, sometimes tenuous, connections– "sometimes we grapple/ at the edge of what seems/ a deadly drop"– this "full measure/ of what we want" ("Trust," 54). And these connections, of passion and a new knowledge, are always embattled, if not from within, then from without:

> . . . *danger*
>
> is his name for us when we
> can't stand another minute of *Deep Throat*
> *6th Year* on the movie marquee
>
> he catalogues kisses in books–
> our kiss is missing. i discover myself
> in your mouth with my tongue–
> the dog's bark makes us jump. somewhere
>
> a man is choosing his prick or fist or gun
> to name one of us *victim*–
>
> ("Naming," 57)

To speak of this violence is to break a taboo which has kept women powerless for centuries. The final selection in *We Speak in Code* is "Ritual: We Fight Back," first spoken by women in Portland, Oregon in 1978. In it, Melanie Kaye has created an oral history of women who returned the violence by which their lives were circumscribed. We are all here; these women connect across lines of class, race, ethnic origin. And we are all in their debt: "When a woman fights back, she creates the possibility for more resistance around her." Melanie Kaye acknowledges as a source of this statement, Adrienne Rich's statement in *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying:* "When a woman tells the truth, she is creating the possibility for more truth around her" (106). These two thoughts are entwined; both speak of a new reality, a new history:

> in the kitchen
> when we climb on chairs to wipe shelves
> we stash knives, paper, string
>
> at the stove
> when we turn the gas on and off
> we see our lives take shape in flame
>
> *dreams*–
> 9 million women with flaming eyes
> relentless, incendiary
> stare at the danger

and the news comes daily–
something creaks open in flame
witch bones rattle
is he afraid?

("Heat Wave," 90)

Note: I reviewed *We Speak in Code* in manuscript, and therefore did not see the visual art by Paula King, Michele Goldman and Lee Pickett. (M.C.)

RAZY QUILT by Susan Wood-Thompson. Crone Books; distributed y Crossing Press, Trumansburg, NY 14886. 61 pp. 1980. $3.00.

In *Crazy Quilt,* her first poetry collection, Susan Wood-Thompon presents work primarily concerned with memory, personal growth, nd relationships among women. Despite the painful nature of much f her material, Wood-Thompson's voice is modest, steady, untheatrical. he tenacious patience with which she explores the meaning of her own nd other women's experience recalls to me Adrienne Rich's lines (in "Transcendental Etude"): ". . . as if a woman quietly walked away/ rom the argument and jargon in a room/and sitting down in the kitchen, egan turning in her lap/bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps. . . ."

As the book's title suggests, a major theme is the menace of catastrophic personal disruption—insanity, acute spiritual crisis, or physical disability—impinging upon the placid-surfaced domestic or "private" sphere. In the terse, impressively crafted "Fever," a young girl goes blind following an illness, experiencing her loss of sight as punishment for having been molested by an old man: ". . . Good girls/don't have that happen to them. Good girls don't/go blind" (p. 5). In "Territory," the poet recalls her girlhood fascination with the secret rituals of nuns, how she stole into the deserted chapel:

> My fingers swiftly handled the breviaries
> I peered at the sisters' holy cards, tried each stall
> expecting the trap door to hell
> to drop open under my knees
> for coming in moonlight
> believing in fire
> for not knowing
> my place.
>
> (9)

In the long, ambitious, and wonderfully titled final poem, "Trying to See Myself Without a Mirror," Wood-Thompson adopts a deliberately prosaic tone and a sprawling, enveloping form. Sometimes summarizing, sometimes zeroing in on striking details, she attempts to arrive at the essential truths of her life, starting with the almost offhand observation that

I have known more women
than men all my life
so the violence
and the love
have come more from them.

(47)

At the end of the poem she has come full circle to the affirmation—beyond adolescent pain and young-adult breakdown—of her attachment to life, her connection to women, and her identity as a lesbian.

For me, the considerable strength of much of this poem is undercut by a didactic, almost moralizing tone in lines such as these:

The bond of suffering
is that we know
we begin with what we have
and do not measure each other
against a perfect husk
that never burst with pain.

(58)

Upon first reading, I felt virtually obligated to applaud this evident wisdom, which is spelled out in similar terms in the book's title poem. The truth is, however, that I'm more moved by earlier, shorter poems such as "Fever," "Territory," and "Frances Kerr Thompson," which, beautiful in their craft, render the complexities of often painful experience without attempting to present formulaic solutions. My favorite of the longer poems, "Light Through the Door," sets the rituals of daily life and the unfolding of a season against the poet's quiet reflection on her experience; it ends with questions.

Like so much of the poetry by lesbian-feminists appearing these days, *Crazy Quilt* is self-published. Physically, this is a particularly accomplished effort, printed on heavy "ivory laid" stock with an attractive quilt collage on the cover. A list of friends who helped shape the manuscript and assisted with design and production attests to the potential of cooperative feminist endeavor; like the poems themselves, the physical fact of this book seems to invite us to return with renewed interest to a feminist examination of the political dimension of personal life.

Jan Clausen

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE by Joan Gibbs. February 3rd Press, c/o Gibbs, 306 Lafayette Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11238. 25 pp. 1979. $2.00.

> Black women are exotic
> yes!
> creatures of the night
> with a hell of a herstory
> erotic
> but we do have our faults. . . .
>
> (19)

Joan Gibbs remarks ironically in her "Untitled Poem for My Sisters." Gibbs proceeds to juxtapose more heroic/"exotic" clichés about Black women with the human realities of their lives; then, in a conclusion both bitterly humorous and telling, she explains that whenever she indulges in wistful fantasies of "dropping out":

> . . . something happens:
> the rent is due
> the phone's about to be cut off
> a brother on the street
> calls me a "bulldagger"
> or
> a white lesbian says,
> "I'm just as oppressed as you are."
>
> Then I'm reminded
> of what Mama always says,
> "You can run but
> you sure can't hide."
>
> (20)

Like this poem, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place,* Gibbs' self-published first collection of "poems and a prose piece," views Black women's experience in a firmly political context while rejecting stereotypes, whether generated by racist projections of Black "exoticism" or the strictures of "political correctness."

At times Gibbs' attitude toward politics, particularly the hermetic variety sometimes cultivated within the lesbian community, is gently mocking ("I wish that I could be like/some other lesbians/with two or three lovers"—"A 'Politically Incorrect' Poem for Sara," p. 16). At times she poses questions for herself and readers. Elsewhere, her political statement is direct and unequivocal, as in "Mantra for the

Women–1977" with its appeal for the freeing of "Joanne Little/ Assata Shakur/Dessie Woods/all the women" (p. 1).

For me, however, the heart of the book, and its most powerful statement, lies in Gibbs' ability to sketch, often with a few deft strokes, the movement through the world of the Black women whose experience concerns her: her own mother, responding with mechanical deference to the white men who come to the door inquiring for her sister a month after her death; the unnamed "Woman on the Corner" who rants about the end of the world while pleading with "David" to "bring back the stereo" (p. 4); "Denise," growing up in a small southern town where there's no future in her crush on her second-grade woman teacher, no encouragement for her aspiration to go north, and no escape from the early pregnancy and ostracism that befall her. Though this experience is often bleak, Gibbs' outlook is not. In "Thinking South," she portrays a rural community where "at six/smoke eases from the chimneys," where "women's liberation never reached":

> across the street
> Ms Selby's alone now:
> her parents
> brothers and sisters
> all dead:
>
> has young girls
> women teachers
> staying with her
>
> from time to time
> you can still hear
> old and young folks say
> "What a shame–a life wasted."
>
> (15-16)

The spare lyricism of pieces such as this underscores the affirmation which, despite the evident pain of a consciousness evolving "between a rock and a hard place," lies at the core of this book.

Jan Clausen

SAGE WRITINGS edited by Barbara Baracks and Kent Jarratt. An Artists & Elders Project Book. Teachers & Writers Collaborative Publications. 84 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011. 1980. 115 pp. $2.50.

> *I keep wondering where everybody else is. Where are the friends I drank beer with in the fifties? Where are the young women I slept with in the thirties and forties? Did they never grow old? Did they never reach sixty-five along with me? Sometimes, alone on the streets, I look about me and feel there has been some kind of catastrophe from which only I have been spared.*
>
> Barbara Macdonald, "Do You Remember Me?"*

Many of us—lesbians in our twenties, thirties, forties—have shared jokes or fantasies or anxieties about the "Dykes' Old-Age Homes" of the future, as if only after the year 2000 will older lesbians exist. Some women, like Barbara Macdonald, remind us that they surely exist now, though we may not recognize or acknowledge them. *SAGE Writings* is an important collection which introduces to us recent work by four older lesbians: Gerry Faier, Ruth Herstein, Florence Holland, and Audrey Seitzova. These women speak to us, and to each other, in voices that are sometimes furious, sometimes tentative, sometimes tender.

SAGE Writings anthologizes work by eight members of the lesbian and gay men's writing workshop at the New York-based organization, SAGE—Senior Action in a Gay Environment. An introduction describes the process of the workshop, which got underway in 1979. At weekly meetings, each member reads recent work "with no preliminary explanation of how the piece came to be written." Each author chose for publication in the anthology selections from her or his own writings. The group's co-leaders, Barbara Baracks and Kent Jarratt, acted as editorial advisors.

The women's contributions to *SAGE Writings* consist of sketches, poems, aphorisms, fragments from longer fiction. Even in these brief selections, distinctive voices sound. In "The Plenipotentiary," Gerry Faier recalls her presidential role in childhood war games with a warm

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*_Sinister Wisdom, Ten,_ special issue: on being old & age (Summer 1979), p. 11.

irony which gives this memoir of events 60 years past an affecting immediacy: "Of course, as President, I prevailed and the world was made safe for Democracy" (10).

The voice in Ruth Herstein's terse narratives, some no longer than two lines, is ferociously sardonic:

> He said, I want your body
> She said, you can have it
> when I'm finished with it ("He," 37)
>
> I have to grow up before
> I'm 65
> Or they will not give me
> my senior citizen card. (39)
>
> She finally got her Ph.D.
> Then she lost it. (40)

Herstein's aphoristic writings are sometimes stunning, and at other times read like brilliant first or last lines of stories yet to be written.

Audrey Seitzova's sketches bring to my mind photo albums and patterned wallpaper—the kind of appealing charm suggested by the anthology's intentionally old-fashioned cover. But in Seitzova's work, too, irony quietly erupts, sometimes in the form of understatement. In "On Getting a New Cat," Seitzova recounts how a neighbor, recently spurned by her husband, urges her to adopt her cat: " 'I made feeble excuses—my broken leg; I couldn't bend over to change the litter pans. . .' " (50). The cat, Sister, does make a home with the narrator and her own cats, who listen with rapt attention to *The Mikado*.

Excerpts from Florence Holland's fiction and poetry present several voices, suggested by the titles of her selections: the poems "Sonnets in the Shakespearean Mode," "Missive to Beethoven/Ninth Symphony, Chorale/ (And to Schiller, the Poet)," and the prose pieces, "The Gringo and the Universal Victim Type" and "Almost Hitched to a Cowboy."

The thematic range of the women's contributions to *SAGE Writings* is quite broad. An excerpt from Holland's *She'll Be All Right* tells of Franky, "seventeen point nine years old," who comes out in Greenwich Village in the thirties. Franky seeks technical advice from a more experienced role model, Helen, and is horrified by

her explanations: "The thought of it made her car-sick" (102). Helen nevertheless carries on, as role models will:

> "The French invented it, maybe. Soixante-neuf. It's really easy. And everybody does it, in case you didn't know. . . . Even marrieds do it, maybe your parents."
>
> Franky simply could not absorb this revelation.
>
> "Shut up about my parents," she yelled. "Talk about your own, damn it, Helen."
>
> (102)

In Gerry Faier's excerpt from *The Born-Again Woman, Or the Reeducation of Mrs. B,* a recent widow comes out, or at least begins the process, at age 64 on a trip to Miami. Faier creates a character who is appealingly eccentric, and at the same time entirely credible. Mrs. B buys insurance before boarding her flight to Florida:

> She named as beneficiaries the most unlikely people: a second cousin that she hadn't seen or spoken to in years, and a fellow-member of the senior citizen center with whom she quarreled about the bus seating on an Atlantic City Casino excursion. (12)

Her story works a revolution in remarkably subtle terms: "Now she was bothered with vague stirrings of discontent, and it disturbed her. She felt disloyal to Sam's memory" (15).

Both these excerpts address a subject not often treated in fiction by lesbians—attitudes toward gay men. Faier's heroine is deeply affected by her chance encounter with a gay man in a Miama cafeteria. She remembers an earlier meeting with people like him, and begins to wonder about her own "curiosity, interest, compassion or—God forbid—identification" (19). Holland's character Helen complains: " 'Most of them act like King Shit with us lesbians. But it's "dahling" to those uptown ladies. . .' " (101).

SAGE writings tell of lovers and friends, families and pets, neighbors and acquaintances. The four women give us glimpses of their pasts (and the recollections sometimes intersect; Seitzova and Faier each write about matinee viewings of *The Perils of Pauline* on two sides of the Atlantic). Autobiographical statements place the authors in the present, sometimes in moving terms. There is, as well, a clear sense of the future, of resiliency:

. . . and from the small
aperture there sprang a tentative new
stem which set my heart to racing, trustful
that hope and love must be granted me again

Florence Holland, "Sonnets in the
Shakespearean Mode, Spring I" (105)

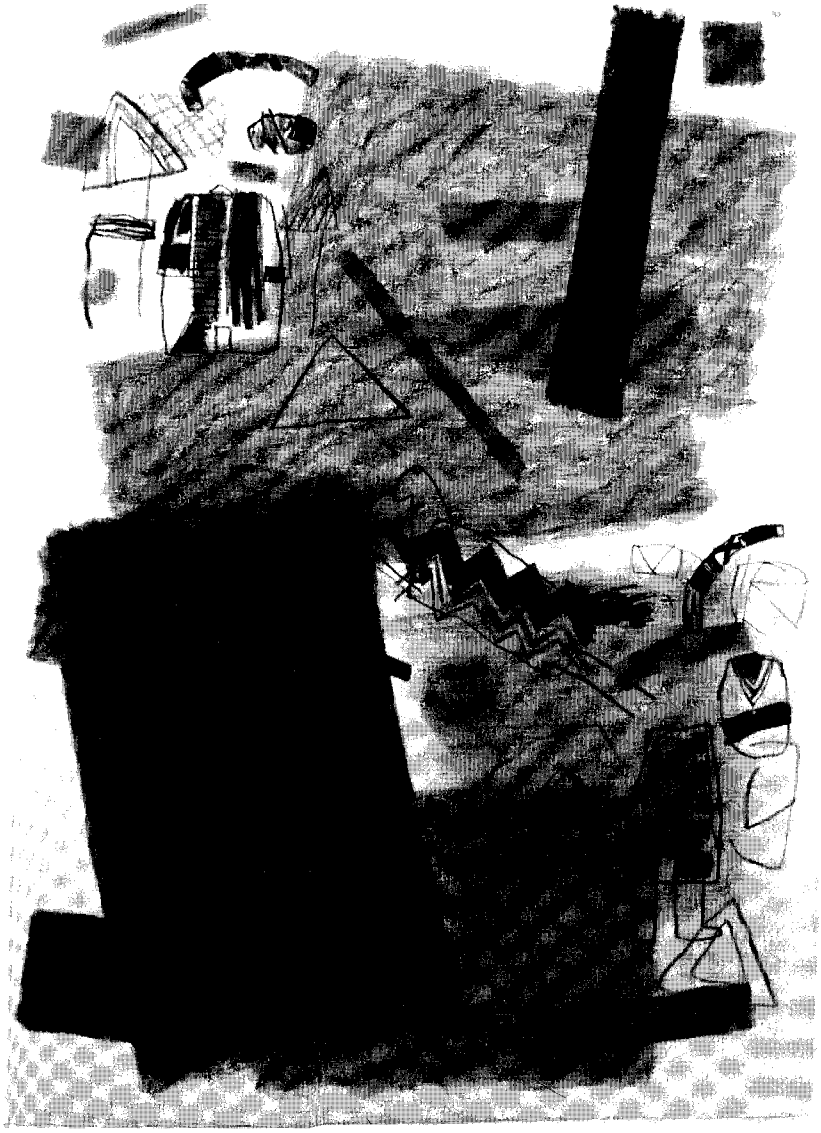
She was not without hope,
She bought a double bed.

Ruth Herstein (40)

Some of these selections are called works-in-progress; but that description might be applied to many of the *SAGE Writings.* I sensed in these selections the beginnings or middles of stories yet to be told fully, outlines of characters yet to be fleshed out. *SAGE Writings* assembles work presented at the workshop's early meetings; the compilation of this anthology began within several months of the group's formation. The workshop continues, and we can look forward to future work by these women, and hopefully by others who may join them or who may follow their example.

Rima Shore

response



NELLIE WONG

ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN, FEMINISM AND CREATIVITY

Barbara Noda's review of two special issues of *Bridge,* an Asian American Perspective, on Asian American Women (*Conditions: Six*) supports the necessity that Asian American women must be published and heard. As a writer and an avid supporter of women's literature, it pleased me to see Noda's review in *Conditions* because it is one of the few feminist magazines, from its inception, that actively publishes work by and about Third World women.

However, I must respond to Noda's review because I disagree with some of her views; because she does not clarify her criticism of a lack of a feminist perspective in many of the women's work; and, finally, because she fails to discuss these women's radical Third World perspectives and the connection with their creativity that addresses the issues Asian American women face today in their struggle toward freedom.

In addition, I wish to expand on some ideas that I have about feminism and Asian American women which I feel need to be addressed as well as to continue an important and crucial dialogue between us as women.

Criticism As A Political Issue

Noda begins:

> This review is primarily aimed at other Asian women. I view it as a discussion among ourselves that we are allowing others to listen to. In being critical, I know I run the risk of making a mistake, of alienating my own peer group. But it is a risk I am willing to take.

This strikes me as an insecure way to view other Asian women, especially writers and artists, as if to say: "I know I will hurt them because I am critical. And by being critical, I will alienate them because they won't like what I say, or they will disagree with my views." I respect Noda's honesty. However, her statement tends to discredit Asian women writers, let alone writers, who are expressing through their poems, fiction and essays those conditions that impinge upon their lives. Criticism is a nec-

essary and political process of literature and should be given and taken in an open and principled manner. If we respect each other as writers, we must respect the *political* nature of criticism to clarify our thoughts and visions and to help communicate them. Noda's comment suggests that criticism should be dealt with *personally*, that it is a woman's *fault* for having certain ideas about the world we live in. The world of ideas is as much ours as it is men's, and it is insidious to suggest that women writers are incapable of handling criticism.

Asian American Identity: Must It Be Friend Or Foe?

Though Noda aims her review at Asian women, she finds it necessary to explain *Bridge* as an Asian American magazine. Why? Is it because Noda *realizes* she is writing largely for a non-Asian audience? If so, then it is necessary to expand her discussion of Asian American identity. Noda writes,

> . . . many Asian Americans react almost schizophrenically to their label and undergo a series of identity crises; this is understandable, because Asian American is a bi-cultural term that joins sometimes incompatible and contradictory values. Am I Asian or am I American? Who is the Asian in me and who is the American? . . . .
>
> On the other hand, to be an Asian American can result in the fusion of dynamic elements of old and new, Oriental and Occidental, traditional and revolutionary—a synthesis that reflects sophistication and integration, the latter a quality the West has been sorely lacking.

Noda doesn't go far enough on "the fusion of dynamic elements. . ." to be an Asian American. "Oriental and Occidental"? The images that I conjure from such a description lead me to the fabled "Shangri La" where I'd have no problems growing old if people would only forget my "oriental" features and let me be. "Traditional and revolutionary"? Sure! Asian Americans have actively fought for their right to a positive, self-affirming identity. We are not "American" because we eat hot dogs, and we are not "Asian" because we use chopsticks or eat rice and noodles. That split identity, of course, was fostered by the racism of America's anti-Asian exclusion laws, the incarceration of the Japanese Americans during World War II, the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, and the barrage of negative stereotypical images of Asians and Asian Americans through movies, television and literature. Asian Americans have always had a sense of their own identity as a people even though the first American generations had to establish a new and unique identity, that of being Asian American in a hostile land.

On the subject of feminism, Noda writes:

> Feminism is not a word I use casually, because for me, feminism is an active, daily force that propels me forward as a woman and as a lesbian. . . . I am disturbed by many of the authors in these issues because of their denial of a feminist perspective reflected in their writings. They do not have to proclaim themselves feminists or lesbians, but where in their words do they acknowledge whole-heartedly the strength, assertiveness and success in their lives as women? . . . . Or for example, how many of these women exchange roles with their husbands that they may better pursue their activities?

Noda is baiting her Asian sisters who are heterosexual. Does she assume that a simple exchange of roles with their husbands will create an opportunity to pursue their careers or art? Is Noda suggesting perhaps that women must shake off the "yoke" of marriage so they can truly be "free"? Does Noda deny the fact that most Asian women, heterosexual or lesbian, hold jobs to support their families and/or themselves? If Asian women don't have to proclaim themselves feminist or lesbian, but they do confront racism and sexism by writing about it, is such action not "assertive," not "successful"? Is such action nonfeminist? Noda needs to clarify her vision of strength, assertiveness and success so that we may understand what she means.

Feminism, as a concept, is as broad as it is narrow. Black feminist Barbara Smith writes:

> Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women. . . . Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.
>
> (*Frontiers,* Spring 1980, p. 48)

For myself, feminism cannot be discussed, or practiced, without considering the social, economic and cultural conditions of why and how we live, work, create and play. As a woman of color I am not less concerned, vocal or active about the struggle for women's rights. As a feminist I do not leave my ethnicity behind. This point must be made clear. No strides for social change can be made unless we define and unify our feminist activism wholly: that feminism must coalesce with the struggle against racism, class oppression, economic exploitation as well as against sexism and

homophobia. Feminism is all-encompassing; its political content and its practical forms must not divide lesbians into one camp and heterosexual women into another. It is heterosexism we must fight, and feminists of all persuasions, people of color or white, must not allow sexual and/or racial separatism to pit us against one another. If white feminists can take a principled stand against racism, heterosexual women can likewise take a stand against homophobia.

Though Noda asserts that many of the authors in *Bridge* deny a feminist perspective in their writings, I offer the following excerpts that reflect a radical Third World perspective, if not an outright feminist one, because they mirror the injustices of American life and the resistance of Asian Americans against U.S. imperialism, racism, and economic oppression:

> And they would dress us in napalm
> Skin shred to clothe the earth.
> Bodies filling pock marked fields
> Dead fish bloating our harbors.
>
> We, the dangerous,
> Dwelling in the ocean.
> Akin to the jungle.
> Close to the earth.
>
> Hiroshima
> Vietnam
> Tule Lake
>
> And yet we were not devoured.
> And yet we were not broken.
> And yet we are not humbled.
>
> ("We, the Dangerous,"
> Janice Mirikitani, Winter, 35)

> Your loving
> lost in the pumping rush
> weaving madness
> stitching sorrow
> surrendered motherhood
> in pursuit of a penny
> A SEAM
>
> ("Sewer's Cramp,"
> Myenne Nge, Spring, 32)

Of the dozen or so articles in the two special issues of *Bridge*, Noda curiously ignores discussing "Feminism Is Fine, But What's It Done for Asia America?" by Katheryn M. Fong (Winter, pp. 21-22). I raise this because Fong's article, reflecting on the jello-like and racist nature of many white women in the Women's Movement in the early 1970's, challenges any woman who proclaims herself a feminist because of the still prevalent belief that the Women's Movement is only fighting for the rights of "women," which usually means middle-class and upper-class white women. Fong illustrates,

> Ying Lee Kelly, Berkeley (California) City Councilwoman, as a member of a minority women's panel stirred much controversy when she said, "If I am forced to choose to fight against racism or sexism, my first battle must be to fight racism." She was roundly booed by some women in the audience who considered the conference a strictly "women's affair" and wanted no discussions on racism.

Third World feminists, in all segments of the Women's Movement, must not be discounted. Also, white feminists who are actively engaged in anti-racist work must be acknowledged and heard. Further, the visibility of Third World feminists must not be construed as a "front" for white feminists. To do so is to submit to the idea that only white women can be leaders in the struggle for women's equality. To do so is to deny the strengths and leadership of women of color who are actively working in a multi-issue approach against racism, sexism, class and economic oppression and homophobia.

Asian Women As Heroes

Noda's review closes with the provocative statement, "ASIAN WOMEN ARE BEAUTIFUL." I agree, but why and how are Asian women beautiful? Is it because of their grace, their suffering and their endurance? Is it because of their ability to "transcend" their condition as Noda asserts that Mrs. Kim does in "A Picture Bride from Korea" by Alice Chai (Winter, pp. 37-42):

> But Mrs. Kim does not feel powerless. However limited her identity, she seeks to utilize its full potential, and in so doing she transcends her condition.

Noda then quotes the following from Chai's article:

> I helped my family all the way. . . I give them education. Now, they married and all in Hawaii and in Los Angeles, living well. Girls, I sent to sewing school. Now they are all in sewing business. My eldest niece is rich already, about thirty people work for her. I went to see, I was very happy because they are all living well. . . .

Are we to assume, then, that a woman, like Mrs. Kim, can "transcend" her condition by making sure her daughters and nieces become "rich" and "successful" through individual business enterprise? Or by beginning to fight capitalism that keeps women, minorities, gays, and working-class people "in their place"? By organizing workers so that safe, humane working conditions, including child care facilities, are provided those who work and hold up the economy? This is not to criticize Mrs. Kim's experience, her bravery or her fortitude. This is to propose looking at and talking about the women who work for people like Mrs. Kim's daughters and nieces. Where in their lives may we find their success, their strength or their assertiveness?

I am concerned about Noda's hopelessness in her view of many of the works in *Bridge:*

> Is my identity dependent on words like "Jap" or "gook"? From many of the writings in these two issues, sadly, I would think so.

Of course, we are not identified through words like "Jap" or "gook," epithets hurled at us by a racist, white supremacist country who has constitutionally and legally excluded, enslaved, and incarcerated specific groups of Americans because of their race *and* their threat to America's economy. Let's not forget, too, that "gook" was born out of the Vietnam War. But do epithets hold us down? No! The writers in *Bridge* use these words to openly confront racism in order that we may begin to be truly visible. That process is clearly ongoing in Mitsuye Yamada's article, "Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster" (Spring, pp. 11-13). Noda herself states that Yamada calls for a more visible Asian person who will repudiate the stereotype of passivity which has crippled many Asian women (and men). However, Noda distorts Yamada's intent when she states:

> She says that Japanese Americans went to American concentration camps with a shrug of the shoulders

and the resigned acceptance that the Japanese call *shikataganai.*

Yamada does not say this. She says:

> . . . The Japanese have an all-purpose expression in their language for this attitude of resigned acceptance: "Shikataganai." "It can't be helped." "There's nothing I can do about it." It is said with the shrug of the shoulders and tone of finality, perhaps not unlike the "those-were-my-orders" tone that was used at the Nuremburg trials. With all the sociological studies that have been made about. . . World War II, we should know by now that "they" knew that the. . . Japanese Americans would go without too much protest, and of course "they" were right, for most of us (with the exception of those notable few) went, resigned to our fate, albeit bewildered and not willingly. . . .
>
> Perhaps this kind of acceptance is a way of coping with the "real" world. . . . I'm not ready to accept this evolutionary reasoning. . . . Part of being visible is refusing to separate the actors from their actions, and demanding that they be responsible for them.

Part of being visible, then, being feminist, means that Asian women must continue to create. But because we are in a time and place that demands the militant courage of women, we must create by expressing our social realities, and work to change those institutions and conditions that dehumanize us and our communities. That an Asian woman seeks to write lucidly and beautifully is a given, but not under a white-imposed sensibility of language and culture, or a male-defined sense of womanhood.

We must write the truths of our experiences, in our own voices, from the painful awakening of Helen Chong in Merle Woo's story "Recovery" (Winter, pp. 42-45), to the beauty of anger expressed, to taking action as a revolutionary process in our lives. As we write and create, we will free ourselves. But words and images alone will not lead to total freedom. Political vision and content must infuse our words to truly spark the imagination. Political content and vision

mean we must act bravely with our bodies and our brains. Poet Genny Lim inspires us with her poem, "If Sartre Was A Whore," to do what we must to change the ways we've lived, loved and worked:

I am tired of being called a bitch
I am tired of being treated like a cunt
I am tired of being a whore
If I cannot be a woman
If I cannot be a dreamer
If I cannot be an artist
I will not be

BARBARA NODA

Dear Editors:

In response to Nellie Wong's response to my review, I feel that in many instances we were saying the same thing as far as the political issues of racism and sexism. In effect, we probably agree on the *conditions.* However, we do differ in our vision—of feminism and of creativity.

This response is not to further substantiate my vision, but to clarify and reiterate.

Genny Lim states in her Author's Notes to *Paper Angels,* a play about the legacy of Angel Island produced by the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco, that: "As a second generation American-born Chinese, I am part of a very complicated transitional culture that is both traditional and Americanized."

A major goal of my review was to present the uniqueness of this transitional culture as well as the complications. I wrote: "The last eighty* years have had a tremendous impact on our his/herstory, but we represent ancient cultures and much of our identity today reaches far back in time." This is simply to say that our story began long ago and as a minority group with a relatively short his/herstory in the U.S. those roots are an important part of our lives. The writings in *Bridge* by Asian Women focused mainly on our U.S. his/herstory and thus, by omission, presented an imbalanced and narrow view of our cultural identities.

Regarding "attitude," well, the Japanese have a phrase—shikata ga nai.

Sincerely,

Barbara Noda

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*"Eight," as it appeared in the text, was a typographical error. *B.N.*

RIMA SHORE

UPDATE: ON SOPHIA PARNOK

Conditions: Six contained my translations of eight poems by Sophia Parnok—a lesbian who was writing in Russia in the early decades of this century—and my essay "Remembering Sophia Parnok (1885-1933)." In an introduction, I noted that it was, to my knowledge, the first discussion in English of Parnok and her work. I have since heard from Simon Karlinsky, who teaches Russian literature at the University of California at Berkeley. I had cited in my essay his book *Marina Cvetaeva,* and his comments on homophobia and Russian writers in *Slavic Review.*

Karlinsky sent me his article, "Russia's Gay Literature & History (11th-20th Centuries)" (*Gay Sunshine,* Nos. 29/30, Summer/Fall, 1976). In it he had published translations of Parnok's "In the Crowd" and "I'm miserable as only beasts can be," and introduced her as a poet whose work was "a magnificent and powerful account of the situation of a lesbian artist in a male-dominated society" (p. 1). Later in the long survey he devotes several paragraphs to her life and work. He writes, for example, that her marriage to Vladimir Volkenstein was "a marriage of convenience with a sympathetic gay man" arranged to secure her share of the family inheritance. (My impression, from letters Parnok wrote to Volkenstein while their divorce was proceeding, is that emotional entanglement made the marriage far from convenient.)

He offers this evaluation of Parnok's work:

> Parnok matured very slowly as a poet and it took her a long time to find her own voice and manner. Her early poetry is undistinguished. Her magnitude as a poet becomes evident in her fourth and fifth collections of verse, *Music* (1926) and *In a Hushed Voice* (1928). . . She attained her full stature when the press and literary criticism were already fully government-controlled. Parnok's *In a Hushed Voice,* which is clearly a major work by a major poet, went unnoticed in the Soviet press. (p. 5)

In the months since *Conditions: Six* appeared, two previously unpublished poems attributed to Parnok appeared in the Journal *Novyj zhurnal* (*New Journal,* published in the U.S.). These poems were sent to the journal by Valery Pereleshin [pseudonym of Valery Salatko-Petryshche], a gay poet who was born in Siberia and lived in China until he emigrated to Brazil.

I would like to ask anyone who has information about Parnok, or who knows of any writings about her work, to contact me at *Conditions.* I believe that Parnok will in time be remembered, that she will emerge in literary history as a major voice of Russia's post-revolutionary decade.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

PAULA GUNN ALLEN, Laguna-Sioux, Lebanese-American, is a freelance poet and writer living in San Francisco.

BECKY BIRTHA is a black lesbian feminist writer who often reviews books for the *New Women's Times/Feminist Review.* Her stories and poems have appeared in *Azalea, Conditions: Five, Focus, Sinister Wisdom, A Woman's Touch, Women: A Journal of Liberation,* and elsewhere.

MAUREEN BRADY is currently completing her second novel, *Folly.* She is co-founder of Spinsters, Ink, publisher of her first novel, *Give Me Your Good Ear.* Her work has appeared in *Conditions, Sinister Wisdom, Feminary, Southern Exposure,* and *The New Women's Times.*

JANINE CANAN, born in Los Angeles 1942, B.A. Stanford, M.D. NYU, is a practicing psychiatrist in Berkeley. Her first book of poems, *Of Your Seed,* was published by Oyez Press in 1977. "Healing," selected from her unpublished manuscript *Who Buried the Breast of Dreams,* will appear in *New Directions Anthology 42.*

MICHELLE CLIFF is a third-world lesbian feminist writer and co-editor of *Sinister Wisdom* (P.O. Box 660, Amherst, MA 01004).

MARTHA COURTOT– I am poor, a lesbian, a mother; frequently published in *Woman Spirit, Sinister Wisdom,* etc. My political work currently is centered on changing the image of fat women in feminist communities and on racism/classism issues. *Night River* is looking for a publisher.

ROCKY GÁMEZ was born and grew up in the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Gloria is a *real* person and their friendship and experiences are the basis for the *Gloria Stories.* Rocky now lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area and Gloria is pretty much alive and living in the same area where they grew up.

PRISCILLA ANN GOLDING is an active member of Am Tikva, Boston's organization for Lesbian and Gay Jews.

JOY HARJO is a poet, born from Oklahoma. She studied at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, and later received a BA from the University of New Mexico and an MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop. She is a recipient of an NEA Creative Writing Grant. She is the author of *The Last Song* and *What Moon Drove Me To This.* Her new

manuscript of poetry is *She Had Some Horses.* She teaches poetry at Arizona State University and is at work on a novel of poetry.

LINDA HOGAN currently works with Colorado Poets in the Schools Program. She recently won the Five Civilized Tribes Playwriting Award. She has one book in print, *Calling Myself Home,* two others at publishers. She is guest editor for the Native American women's issue of *Frontiers.*

ELEANOR JOHNSON is a Black Feminist therapist, psychic, cat-lover, and Scorpio, and a member of the Combahee River Collective, a radical Black Feminist organization in Boston. Her article "Reflections: On Black Feminist Therapy" appeared in *Conditions: Five–The Black Women's Issue.*

JACQUELINE LAPIDUS recently gave up teaching for a full-time translator's job and helped re-float the English-speaking feminist group in Paris, where she has lived for 14 years. She collaborated with Tee Corinne on *Yantras of Womanloving,* and has a new collection of poems called *Ultimate Conspiracy.*

CATHERINE MADSEN is a songwriter with the Greater Lansing Spinsters' Guild and the author of a play, "Dentata," about women, nature and Christianity. She works as a library clerk in East Lansing, Michigan.

BERNICE MENNIS works at Womanbooks and cares for a little child.

CHERRÍE MORAGA is a Chicana, writer, and cultural worker. She is co-editor of *This Bridge Called My Back, Writings by Radical Women of Color* to be published by Persephone Press in Spring, 1981. A native Californian, at Christmas she moved to Boston.

MARY ANN NELSON is a Black feminist environmentalist active in urban problems in the city of Boston.

LYNNE REYNOLDS is a black lesbian writer and photographer. She has been accused of having no sense of humor. That is true.

ADRIENNE RICH's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" appeared in *Signs,* 1980. She is working on a new book of poems and will be co-editing, with Michelle Cliff, the magazine *Sinister Wisdom.*

DIANA RIVERS – Am living in rural Arkansas, on woman's land, in a small cabin I built myself. Have been writing stories about 9 years,

taking them seriously for about 4, and am now working on a full-length Lesbian fantasy, wanting to give voice and form to our visions.

WENDY ROSE lives in Richmond, CA, and is a lecturer in Native American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She lives with a magician who has a black belt in judo and a middle-aged cat.

MIRIAM SAGAN has been in residence at Yaddo, MacDowell, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and Cummington Community. She has recently done anti-draft and anti-nuclear work. She is a small press reviewer and an editor/co-founder of Zephyr Press.

BEVERLY SMITH is the director of a new project, The Black Women Artists Film Series in Boston, Massachusetts. She sees the film series as the beginning of a long-lived institution which will support and honor the boundless creativity of Black women.

JAUNE QUICK-TO-SEE SMITH lives in New Mexico. Her work has been exhibited in galleries, museums, and public collections across the country and in Europe.

JUDITH STEIN is an activist and writer in the Fat Liberation movement; she also writes Jewish-Lesbian feminist rituals known as *Bobbeh Meisehs (Grandmothers' Tales).* She may be contacted for information on Fat Liberation or for a list of *Bobbeh Meisehs* at 137 Tremont Street, Cambridge, MA 02139.

STEPHANIE STRICKLAND is the Women's Studies librarian at Sarah Lawrence College. Her poems have appeared in *Calyx, Ironwood, Iowa Review,* and elsewhere.

Small-press books by contributors to CONDITIONS: SEVEN *include:*

Paula Gunn Allen, *Coyote's Daylight Trip* (La Confluencia, P.O. Box 409, Albuquerque, NM 87108), 1978, 50 pp., $3.95.

Maureen Brady, *Give Me Your Good Ear,* novel (Spinsters, Ink, R.D. 1, Argyle, NY 12809), 1979, 144 pp., $4.50 plus .60 postage.

Janine Canan, *Of Your Seed* (Oyez Press, SBD 1784 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, CA 94709), 1977, 60 pp., $2.00 plus .13 tax in Cal., add .75 p/h.

Jan Clausen, *After Touch* (Distributed by Long Haul Press, P.O. Box 592, Van Brunt Station, Brooklyn, NY 11215), 1975, 76 pp., $2.00 plus .60 postage/handling. Checks payable to Long Haul Press.

———, *Waking at the Bottom of the Dark* (Long Haul Press), 1979, 80 pp., $3.00 plus .60 postage/handling.

———, *Mother, Sister, Daughter, Lover,* stories (The Crossing Press, Trumansburg, NY 14886), 1980, $4.95.

Michelle Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (Persephone Press, Box 7222, Watertown, MA 02172), 1980, 72 pp., $4.00 plus $1.00 p/h.

Martha Courtot, *Tribe,* poems (Pearlchild Prod., available from the author at 2800 St. Paul Dr. No. 259, Santa Rosa, CA 95405), $3.00.

———, *Journey,* poems (Pearlchild Prod., available from the author), $3.00.

Joy Harjo, *The Last Song* (poems).

———, *What Moon Drove Me to This,* poems (I. Reed Books, 285 E. 3rd St., NY 10009).

Linda Hogan, *Calling Myself Home* (Greenfield Review Press, Greenfield Center, NY 12833), $2.00.

———, *Daughters, I Love You* (Loretto Heights College, Denver, CO, Order from Women's Research Center), 1981.

Jacqueline Lapidus, *Ready to Survive* (Hanging Loose Press, 231 Wyckoff St., Brooklyn, NY 11217), 1975, 63 pp., $3.00.

———, *Starting Over* (Out & Out Books, 476 Second Street, Brooklyn, NY 11215), 1977, 63 pp., $3.50.

———, *Yantras of Womanloving* (with Tee Corinne), 1981.

Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Persephone Press), 1981, $8.95 plus $1.00 p/h.

Adrienne Rich, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" (Motheroot Publications, 241 Dewey St., Pittsburgh, PA 15218), $2.00 plus .30 postage.

———, "The Meaning of Our Love for Women Is What We Have Constantly to Expand" (Out & Out Pamphlet No. 1), 1977, $1.00.

Wendy Rose, *Hopi Roadrunner Dancing* (Greenfield Review Press), 1973.

———, *Long Division: A Tribal History* (Strawberry Press, P.O. Box 451, Bowling Green Sta., New York, NY 10004), 1976/1980, rev. 2nd ed.

———, *Academic Squaw: Reports to the World from the Ivory Tower* (Blue Cloud Press, Blue Cloud Abbey, Marvin, SD 57251), 1977.

————, *Poetry of the American Indian Series: Part 2, Wendy Rose* (American Visual Communications Bank (multi-media), P.O. Box 26392, Tucson, AZ 85726), 1978.

————, *Builder Kachina: A Home-Going Cycle* (Blue Cloud Press), 1979.

————, *Lost Copper* (Malki Museum Press, Morongo Indian Reservation, Banning, CA 92220), 1980.

————, *What Happened When the Hopi Hit New York* (Contact II Press, P.O. Box 451, Bowling Green Station, New York, NY 10004), 1981.

Miriam Sagan, *Dangerous Body* (Samisdat Press, Box 231, Richford, VT 05476), 1976, $1.00.

————, *Vision's Edge* (Samisdat Press), 1978, $1.00.

Work by contributors to CONDITIONS: SEVEN *is included in the following small-press anthologies:*

Against Infinity (Primary Press), 1979. *Jacqueline Lapidus.*

The Coming Out Stories, Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe, eds. (Persephone Press), 1980. 251 pp., $6.95. *Maureen Brady, Cherríe Moraga.*

Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology, Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin, eds. (Persephone Press), 1981, 336 pp., $10.95 plus $1.00 p/h. *Paula Gunn Allen, Becky Birtha, Jan Clausen, Michelle Cliff, Martha Courtot, Jacqueline Lapidus, Cherríe Moraga, Barbara Noda, Adrienne Rich.*

The Lesbian Reader (Amazon Press), 1975. *Jacqueline Lapidus.*

This Bridge Called My Back, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. (Persephone Press), 1981, $8.95 plus $1.00 p/h. *Beverly Smith.*

Top Ranking: A Collection of Articles on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community, Joan Gibbs and Sara Bennet, eds. (February 3rd Press, 306 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11238), 1980, 148 pp., $3.50 (more if you can/less if you can't), free to women in prison. *Beverly Smith.*

Posters (in color) by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith are available from the artist, c/o Conditions.

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

Maggie Anderson, *Years That Answer,* poetry (Harper & Row), 90 pp., $5.95.

Ruth Baetz, *Lesbian Crossroads: Personal Stories of Lesbian Struggles and Triumphs* (Morrow), 273 pp., $10.95.

Nancy C. Baker, *New Lives for Former Wives: Displaced Homemakers* (Anchor Press/Doubleday), 271 pp., $9.95.

Barbara Baracks and Kent Jarratt, eds., *Sage Writings: from the lesbian and gay men's writing workshop at Senior Action in a Gay Environment* (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 84 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10011), 115 pp., $2.50.

Jane Barnes, *They Say I Talk in My Sleep,* poetry (Quark Press, Box 193, Cambridge, MA 02141), 16 pp., $2.00.

Rebecca Béguin, *Her Voice in the Drum,* Novella (Lichen, Box 616, Hanover, NH 03755), 75 pp., $3.95.

Bloodroot Collective, *The Political Palate: A Feminist Vegetarian Cookbook* (Sanguinaria Publishing; The Crossing Press, Trumansburg, NY 14886), 325 pp., $8.95.

Dorothy Bryant, *Prisoners,* novel (Ata Books, 1928 Stuart St., Berkeley, CA 94703), 176 pp., $5.

Pat Califia, *Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality* (Naiad Press, P.O. Box 10543, Tallahassee, FL 32302), 180 pp., $6.95.

Hazel Cartin, *Elijah,* autobiography (St. Martin's Press), 311 pp., $13.95.

Michelle Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise,* poetry (Persephone Press, Box 7222, Watertown, MA), 64 pp., $4.00.

Jane Creighton, *Ceres in an Open Field,* poetry (Out & Out Books, 476 Second St., Brooklyn, NY 11215), 72 pp., $3.50.

Enid Dame, *On the Road to Damascus, Maryland,* poetry (Downtown Poets Co-op, GPO Box 1720, Brooklyn, NY 11201), 56 pp., $2.50.

Dragon's Delight: A Non-Sexist Activity Book for Children (Central Vermont Women's Center, 18 Langdon St., Montpelier, VT. 05602), 29 pp., $1.50.

Helen Duberstein, *The Human Dimension,* poetry (Four Corners Press, 463 West St., New York, NY 10014), 10 pp., $1.00.

Sandra Maria Esteves, *Yerba Buena,* poetry illustrated by the author (The Greenfield Review Press, RD 1, Box 80, Greenfield Center, NY 12833), 92 pp., $5.00.

Lillian Faderman and Brigitte Eriksson, eds. and trans., *Lesbian-Feminism in Turn-of-the-Century Germany,* stories and autobiographies (Naiad Press), 97 pp., $5.95.

Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (William Morrow), 1981, 496 pp., $18.95.

Ruth Geller, *Pictures from the Past and Other Stories* (Imp Press, P.O. Box 93, Buffalo, NY 14213), 1980, 203 pp., $7.95.

Sally George, *Frog Salad* (Scribner's), 1981, 210 pp., $10.95.

Roberta Gould, *Writing Air, Written Water,* poems (Waterside Press, Box 1298, Stuyvesant Station, NY, NY 10009), 87 pp., $3.95.

Ellen Greenlaw, Devi K. Hunt, S. Reddick, Adrienne Lauby, *Pie in the Sky,* poetry (she-who-wants-does publishers, P.O. Box 10953, Eugene, OR 97440), 53 pp., $2.50 plus .75 postage.

Jana Harris, *Alaska,* novel (Harper & Row), 316 pp., $11.95.

Miesje Jolley, *A Crack in Time,* journal and woodcuts (West End Press, Box 697, Cambridge, MA 02139), 48 pp., $6.00.

June Jordan, *Passion: New Poems, 1977-1980* (Beacon Press), 97 pp., $4.95.

Susan Koen and Nina Swaim, *Aint No Where We Can Run: Handbook on Women on the Nuclear Mentality* (WAND, Box 421, Norwich, VT 05055), 74 pp., $2 plus .50 postage/handling.

Marilyn Krysl, *Honey You've Been Dealt A Winning Hand,* stories (Capra Press, P.O. Box 2068, Santa Barbara, CA 93120), 139 pp., $6.50.

Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (Spinsters, Ink, RD 1, Argyle, NY 12809), 77 pp., $4.00.

Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing for Writers, Editors and Speakers* (Lippincott & Crowell), 134 pp., $8.95.

Cynthia Navaretta, ed., *Voices of Women: 3 Critics on 3 Poets on 3 Heroines* (Midmarch Associates, P.O. Box 3304, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10017), 54 pp., $4.00.

Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *The Mother/Child Papers,* poetry (Momentum Press, 512 Hill St., No. 4, Santa Monica, CA 90405), 62 pp., $3.95.

Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt* (Harper & Row), 119 pp., $16.95.

Monica Raymond, *Sign Language,* poetry (Whole Women Press), 57 pp.

Jane Rule, *Contract with the World,* novel (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 339 pp., $12.95.

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Penelope Shuttle, *Rainsplitter in the Zodiac Garden,* novel (Longship Press, RFD 1, Box 124, Brooks, ME 04921), 182 pp., $9.95.

Jean Sirius, *The Green Womon Poems* (Sirius Books, Box 1027, Brooklyn, NY 11202), 25 pp., $2.50.

Holly Sklar, ed., *Trilateralism: The Trilateral Commission and Elite Planning for World Management* (South End Press), 604 pp., $8.00.

Judith W. Steinbergh, *Lillian Bloom: A Separation,* poetry (Wampeter Press, Box 512, Green Harbor, MA 02041), 79 pp., $4.95.

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We would like to inform our sisters of the existence of a Latin American Lesbian Collective which will publish an anthology dealing with our issues and concerns. We invite you to submit articles, short stories, poems or songs in either Spanish or English. Those interested contact us as soon as possible at (212) 473-6864. Materials can be mailed to LALA in care of Digna Landrove, 170 Ave. C. No. 4H, New York, NY 10009.

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DO YOU REMEMBER MONA'S? Did you hang out at the Hilltop or any other New York Lesbian bar? The Lesbian History Project of New York is starting. Any Lesbian interested in participating in the group, contributing materials or sharing memories about New York metropolitan area Lesbian life pre-1970 please contact us through the Lesbian Herstory Archives (P.O. Box 1258, New York, N.Y. 10116) or call 212-874-7232 or 516-333-5719. We are interested in collecting bar names and locations, information about Lesbian life and social networks, incidents, events, impressions, stories, photographs, memories. All communications are confidential.

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