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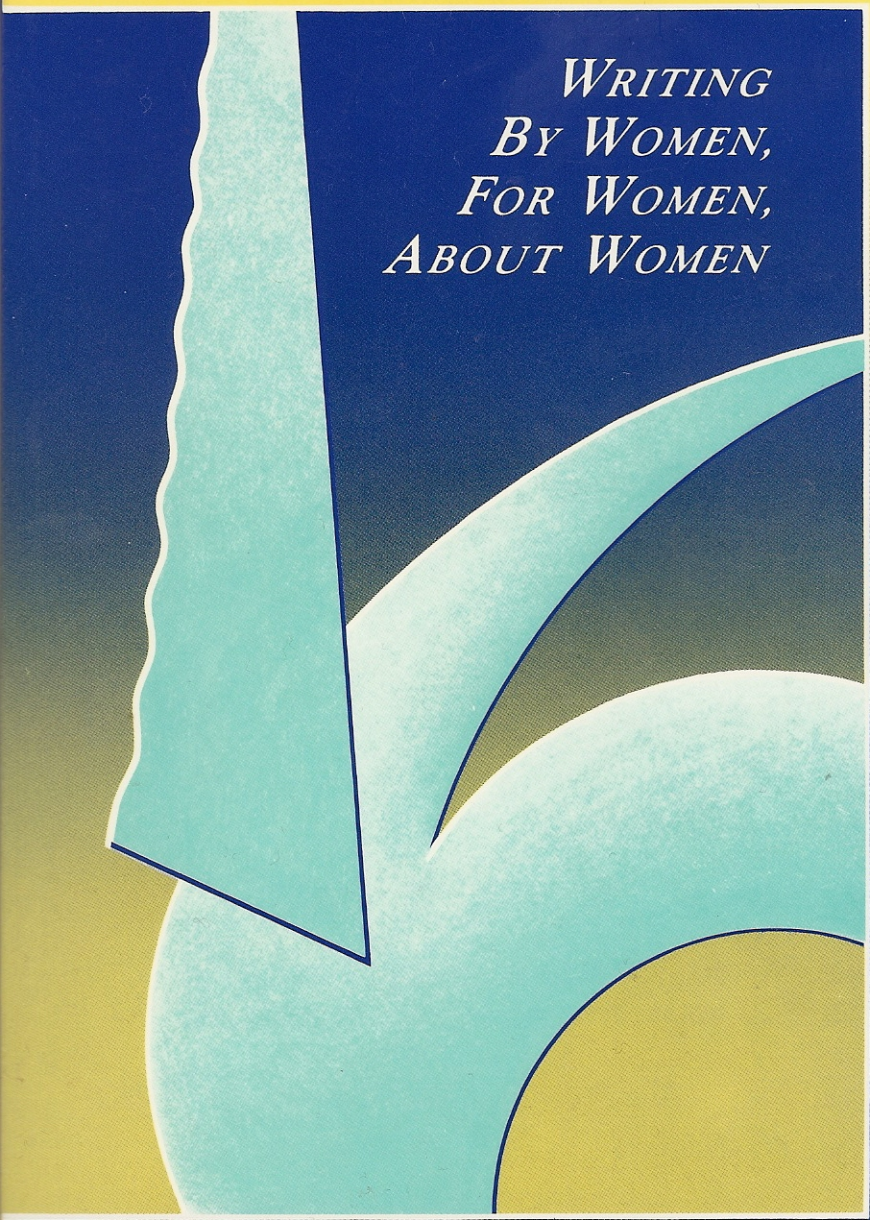

conditions: sixteen

a feminist magazine of writing by women
with an emphasis on writing by lesbians

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conditions:sixteen was supported in part by funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and by the Astraea Foundation.

Editing: Cheryl Clarke, Melinda Goodman, Paula Martinac, Pam A. Parker, Dorothy Randall Gray, and Mariana Romo-Carmona.
Desktop Publishing: Beth Haskell.
Mechanicals: Jane Sharples.
Graphic Design: Dorothy Randall Gray.
Cover Design and Artwork: Eve Sandler.
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Special thanks to: Jan Boney, Eliza C. Galaher, Sara Perl, Liz Walber and The Trust for Public Land.
ISSN 0147-8311.

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"Lesbians in American Indian Cultures" appeared under the title "Hwame, Koshkalaka, and the Rest" in The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions by Paula Gunn Allen. Copyright © 1986 by Paula Gunn Allen. Reprinted by permission of Beacon Press.

conditions is listed in the Index of American Periodical Verse and the American Humanities Index.

conditions:sixteen was created using WordPerfect 5.0 for text processing and Xerox's Ventura Publisher 2.0 with Bitstream Fontware's Souvenir typeface for page composition.

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

Introduction

conditions:sixteen features the best of the last twelve years of ***conditions.*** This collection, published during the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, offers ground-breaking writings by Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Barbara Smith, Paula Gunn Allen, and other voices who have helped give definition and direction to the Lesbian movement. Their on-going dialogue reflects and informs the concerns of an increasingly diverse, conscious and self-determined community. We are grateful to these women for the hard work they've put into sharing and building their visions with us.

As we acknowledge our growing strength, we also grieve the recent loss of Pat Parker, Black feminist mother, lesbian poet, warrior. Pat died at the age of forty-five on Saturday, June 17th after a two-year battle with cancer. For over twenty years, she addressed and explored all parts of her experience, particularly as an African-American and as a Lesbian. Racism, homophobia, class oppression, interracial love, violence against women: regardless of how controversial or unpopular her stand, she always put herself on the line. In the many poems that are her legacy to us, Pat Parker continues to sustain us with her love, anger and pure guts. For this reason, we dedicate our sixteenth issue to Pat Parker.

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REMEMBER, THIS

Olga Broumas

is only my side
of the story. We haven't said
a word to each other these thirteen
months, nor seen
one another, two blocks away
on the same street, in this small
neighborhood by the Amazon slough.

I never kissed her.

We had been talking for years
across the soup, or tea, or some
hot liquid, and always Bi-
sexuality, as we called it, entered
the room mid-meal. We had been talking for years.
It was last spring. My breath
deep in my lungs, my first
solo free-fall, no
parachute, I said: *I love you*, frightened, more

terrified than she, who dandled
her infant daughter bare
on her bare knee, who laughed
a nervy, drawn in laugh, saying: At least
you're not pregnant.
Laughter.
A huge
air pocket sucked me back
to the metal
belly of the plane, my own
gut reeling. That was the next

to the last
time I saw her. I didn't kiss her
then. I never

kissed her.

from ***conditions:1*** 1977

> It is an attempt to interpret slum life in terms of *Negro* experience, when a larger frame of reference is required. As Alain Locke has observed, "*Knock on Any Door* is superior to *The Street* because it designates class and environment, rather than mere race and environment, as its antagonist."[4]

Neither Robert Bone nor Alain Locke, the Black male critic he cites, can recognize that *The Street* is one of the best delineations in literature of how sex, race, *and* class interact to oppress Black women.

In her review of Toni Morrison's *Sula* for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1973, putative feminist Sara Blackburn makes similarly racist comments. She writes:

> ...Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality than this beautiful but nevertheless distanced novel. *And if she does this, it seems to me that she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification "black woman writer" and take her place among the most serious, important and talented American novelists now working.*[5] [Italics mine.]

Recognizing Morrison's exquisite gift, Blackburn unashamedly asserts that Morrison is "too talented" to deal with mere Black folk, particularly those double nonentities, Black women. In order to be accepted as "serious," "important," "talented," and "American," she must obviously focus her efforts upon chronicling the doings of white men.

The mishandling of Black women writers by whites is paralleled more often by their not being handled at all, particularly in feminist criticism. Although Elaine Showalter in her review essay on literary criticism for *Signs* states that: "The best work being produced today [in feminist criticism] is exacting and cosmopolitan," her essay is neither.[6] If it were, she would not have failed to mention a single Black or Third-World woman writer, whether "major" or "minor" to cite her questionable categories. That she also does not even hint that lesbian writers of any color exist renders her purported overview virtually meaningless. Showalter obviously thinks that the identities of being Black and female are mutually exclusive as this statement illustrates.

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

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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 *koskalaka* 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

from **conditions:7** 1981

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 heterosexual—concerns a male, a *winkte*. The stories about *koskalaka* 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.[23] 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 *koskalaka* 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. *Koskalaka* 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

from ***conditions:7*** 1981

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 discover what it means.

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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 organisations.

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," in 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: Quetzalcoatl/The Ritual of Concolence/ 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.

from ***conditions:7*** 1981

THE DESERT IS NOT THE ENEMY

Sy Margaret Baldwin

for the Salvadorans who died in Organ Pipe
National Monument 7/80

1
on thurdsay they crossed the border
the blue sky of the Sonora burned
over their heads
on friday they reached the edge
Caludia under the shadeless palo verde
Rosa dying face down in the desert a cactus
    stuffed in her mouth flesh together with spines
(she said *kill me Carlos there*
can only be so much pain)

in the night a sharp moon sinking quickly
into forms of bitter scrub/ at sunrise
we fought over the water
that was left reeling through
the dry watercourses, scratched by
cactcus again & again

I am hiding
this piece of clothing soaked in urine
so I can survive

2
he said it would be easy
he said it was all taken care of
he said they wouldn't catch us walking across the desert
we paid him with our savings & crossed the border
fleeing towards a better life/ we were not prepared
for the heat, the spines, the creosote-spotted
plain, the eroded buttes, the dry gullies
fingering back to the gray volcanic mountains,
the incredible shape of our thirst

from ***conditions:8*** 1982

3
this was El Camino del Diablo
this was the road of the goldseekers
down to the last watering place, Quitobaquito,
a grove of trembling cottonwoods

4
mesquite ironwood paloverde

what my name is I have forgotten
I take off my blouse/ it is
my skin

it is the thin desert soil

5
the way the july light strikes down like a knife

the way the pores slam shut like doors

the way the mesquite's taproot travels
hundreds of feet feeling for water the way
the exposed skin turns dark & leathery, the unexposed
skin sloughs off
the way the flesh shrinks from the bone
the way the great inland lakes of the Pleistocene
shrank to form the American Desert
the way our lives have been
    shaped by arbitrary borders
the way I've been scratched by transparent spines
the way the desert is the background of who we are
the way only parts of us survive

6
on thursday they left behind
    the headless bodies in the streets
they crossed the border carrying
20 gallons of water
into the open desert

from ***conditions:8*** 1982

EL PAISANO IS A BIRD OF GOOD OMEN

Gloria Anzaldúa

from a novel in progress

She straddles the mesquite post. Balanced on the top of the corral, she watches the white sky dwarf the chaparral, the cattle and horses, the house, and the *portal* with the guests moving under it. These objects ripple under the sun's glare like clothes billowing on the clothesline. Only the compact shadows give the objects and people the solidity of reality. The sun

dominates the land. Always. La tierra. Everywhere, punctuated here and there with mesquite thickets and clumps of prickly pear. Under the quickening hum of the guests' conversation and the clinking of knives on plates, she hears the cackle of the hens clucking over their finds, a fat earthworm or dry grass seeds. On the highest branch of The Mesquite a mockingbird imitates another bird's trill. Under her, the hard roundness of the mesquite post seems an appendage of herself, a fifth limb, one that's also part of the corral, the corral that's part

of the land. The corral is a series of thick posts sunk side by side into the ground with just enough space between them to accommodate, horizontally, half a dozen logs alternating one on top of the other in such a way that the logs lock into each other between the paired posts. Like people who try pairing, then stacking to accommodate each other and fence out the awareness of separateness. If the tops of the posts aren't flush with the average height their heads are either lopped off to make a tidy corral or they are cast out as deficient, unsuitable. She feels her body flowing from

one post to another until it, too, encircles what the corral encircles. But the gates are wide open, the circle will be incomplete until dusk when the newly calved cows are rounded in for the night. No, not complete until her new house is finished. Anda en la garra—on the rag. During her menses she feels

from ***conditions:8*** 1982

> Furthermore, there are other literary subcultures (black American novelists, for example) whose history offers a precedent for feminist scholarship to use.[7]

The idea of critics like Showalter *using* Black literature is chilling, a case of barely disguised cultural imperialism. The final insult is that she footnotes the preceding remark by pointing readers to works on Black literature by white males Robert Bone and Roger Rosenblatt!

Two recent works by white women, Ellen Moers' *Literary Women: The Great Writers* and Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination* evidence the same racist flaw.[8] Moers includes the names of four Black and one Puertorriqueña writer in her seventy pages of bibliographical notes and does not deal at all with Third-World women in the body of her book. Spacks refers to a comparison between Negroes (sic) and women in Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* under the index entry, "blacks, women and." "*Black Boy* (Wright)" is the preceding entry. Nothing follows. Again there is absolutely no recognition that Black and female identity ever coexist, specifically in a group of Black women writers. Perhaps one can assume that these women do not know who Black women writers are, that they have had little opportunity like most Americans to learn about them. Perhaps. Their ignorance seems suspiciously selective, however, particularly in the light of the dozens of truly obscure white women writers they are able to unearth. Spacks was herself employed at Wellesley College at the same time that Alice Walker was there teaching one of the first courses on Black women writers in the country.

I am not trying to encourage racist criticism of Black women writers like that of Sara Blackburn, to cite only one example. As a beginning I would at least like to see in print white women's acknowledgement of the contradictions of who and what are being left out of their research and writing.[9]

Black male critics can also *act* as if they do not know that Black women writers exist and are, of course, hampered by an inability to comprehend Black women's experience in sexual as well as racial terms. Unfortunately there are also those who are as

fragile, expansive, the limits of her body stretched beyond her skin, she flows out like a sheet, encompassing, covering chairs, people, everything around her. There is still time.

There is still time to change her mind. She shifts her bottom, the post is now on the left side of her cunt. Gently, she sways back and forth. If she does it just right she can bring herself to orgasm. Not as good as during a fast run, the wind whipping the mare's mane, her own hair across her mouth, no one hears her. She wonders: what encircles, what excludes, what sets apart.

"Andrea." Her mother is walking towards her. She's dressed in a pin striped two-piece suit, white blouse, black hat veiled at the back, white open-toed pumps. Her mother made it a point to dress better than the other women.

"Si, 'Amá. Qué quieres?" she asks, jumping down.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Everything. Why? What do you care?"

"You look hollow-eyed, hot. I don't want you embarrassing me today."

"The feeling, 'Amá. It's come back."

"No seas tonta, hijita. You must mingle with the guests. And get out of those man's pants. I find it totally incomprehensible why you moon out here like a lost calf and why Zenobio keeps himself hidden all afternoon in the house with your sisters draping themselves around him like a harem."

"And what's the harm in that? Why can't he just do what he wants?"

All day he's kept away from her, the waiting in his eyes (*Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother.*) expecting a word or act from her. But if he's not around to remind her she may never say it or do it.

"Go and change, greñuda, muchacha chiflada. And comb the mesquite leaves out of your hair—go! Chase your sisters out of the house. Tell them to bring out more tortillas de masa y la carne."

"No."

Her mother opens her mouth then closes it. Then more gently, Andrea says, "Why don't *you* go and do that and talk to Doña Inés. Todos la hacen menos."

from ***conditions:8*** 1982

Both turn and look at Doña Inés, Zenobio's mother. She stands alone in the middle of the *portal* wringing a pair of black gloves. Under a crownless, parachute hat her face is emaciated and passive. Her beige jacket hangs loose from her thin shoulders, her black wide hemmed skirt drags on the dirt.

"All she talks about is how well her 'baby' can cook. I suppose if he wanted to she would let him take up sewing," says Andrea's mother.

"If he enjoys cooking, why shouldn't he cook," says Andrea turning away, at once regretting her habit of contradicting her mother, her habit of heaping all her griefs, from infancy to womanhood, on her mother's back. She knows that on top of the stored up grievances, she will lay future ones. But the thought is an old one, too familiar to explore, and almost at once she forgets her mother.

The land. She never tires of looking at the land. She could never leave the land. The house faces east. It is an oasis in the middle of the brushland. To its right, on the gnarled limbs of The Mesquite, her brothers have roofed a shelter for guests and tables of food. The *portal*, erected with corrugated aluminum of different lengths and cedar branches that still distill their piny fragrance, looks unnatural. The Mesquite reigns over the *portal*, the house, the yard. Only The Windmill rivals its height. Perhaps its fifty or sixty foot deep roots tap the same underground water source as The Windmill. She wants to tap that deep place, too. Maybe if she stayed still long enough her feet would worm roots into the moist core. Her two things: The Papalote, The Windmill, that she built with her brothers' help and The Mesquite she claimed as soon as she could climb it. Both connected...somehow. The trunk—a black wrung-out piece of cloth whose whorls and twists point toward some

revelation. She studies the gnarls and tries to unravel them. The Mesquite looks like an ancient ballet dancer doing a one-legged twirl, arms and head appealing to the sky. The trunk oozes a black gummy secretion from a lipless vagina mouth. If only she knew how to listen to the tree she would know what the mouth is screaming. She could once. She

remembers gazing up at the tree and talking to it in its own language when she was about three. What is it that Tío Efraín is always platitudinizing? "Beautiful women and trees are more apt to be embrujadas." Bewitched. She climbs the corral again to see The Mesquite better. As the wind stirs the tree's limbs, Andrea sways

like The Papalote, Andrea sways, her hair becomes ruffled leaves. The tree is a tree. But is it just a tree. ("*Ego jungo ves in matrimonium.*") To the right of the *portal*, the partially finished house, looking like the gutted side of a cow, two walls up, a skeleton roof, the floor strewn with pieces of lumber and buckets of nails resembling the rotting entrails of the animal. Laughter erupts from a group of men sitting on two thick cedar logs and half a dozen bales of sorghum that lie sprawled in a semi-circle under the *portal*. She is not part of this half

circle. She is outside of it. (*The priest sprinkles water over their bowed heads.*) Directly west of the house are the corrals. Next to them, towering over the ranch house and corrals, is The Windmill, a permanent silver sunflower. She twists around. The Windmill, the beacon that guides the hands home from a sea of brush and cactus, is moving. The wind has turned the vane. The vane, an arrow shaft, points toward the south. On the vane, the words DE LA CRUZ shine bright in the afternoon sun. Hay algo en al aire. Something is in

the wind. The Windmill's sails rotate faster and faster as the south wind surges louder and louder, and though she sits motionless, Andrea too rotates with the sails. She doesn't have to sit up there, she is up there. She feels the guests' sly glances brush over her wild henna hair. She can hear their heads repeating over and over, "strange," "too willful and impulsive." They would like to throw a saddle on her, dig their spurs deep into her sides, pull hard on the bridle until her mouth runs red, loses its adamancy. Or, tie her to a post like a wild heifer, tail between her legs, head caught in the trough and

milk her. Sand down her *dentata* to a toothless grim. Well, she's not going to laugh at their jokes and snide remarks nor smile. Already her mouth

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hurts from not smiling. She touches her throat, touches

pearls. The string of pearls she didn't wear. She will not wear. Her hands smooth the silk of her dress, the dress she does not wear. She will not wear dresses here. Not here—maybe in another place. No, no, no. Sweat drenches the hair in her armpits. She takes a deep breath. Another. After a while the no's become quiet like baby chicks under the mother hen. She weans her attention away from The Windmill and waits for the everydayness to fold its wings around her again. Warm and safe. Home.

A handful of steers drink at the edge of the water-hole beyond The Windmill. Half a mile beyond the waterhole is the dark green of the lagoon. Andrea blinks and half of her moves to the lagoon's edge. The greedy land slowly sucks at the meager rains it trapped in its hold during January and February. Insidious roots slither silently toward its edge and swell like thin sponges. Low dark clouds crowd the horizon. If only the wind would turn. Huisache and prickly pear fringe the lagoon. The yellow-orange flowers of the cactus and the pale gold of the huisache, the sole colors in the brown and barren land. It is April: the semidesert is in bloom. The huisache's tiny pompom blossoms move gently, dispersing their delicate perfume in the hot wind. Andrea feels the leaves' feathery softness on her face, soft like the heads of newly hatched chicks, crests still wet and yielding. A thorn scratches her cheek dispatching her other half

back. Instantly, the lagoon and huisache are far away. The men's voices grow louder..."Las mujeres, they're more susceptible to it. Their fury is more unbridled than ours. They can't temper their...well, their tempers. And they're fickle by nature."

"What do you know about females. The closest you've been to one is that cow you keep in your kitchen."

"You mean his wife?" There is a roar of laughter.

"No, no," interrupts another, "it gets in their blood, where they boil vile vapors. When they belch they infect everyone near them."

"Yes," says another, "if a pregnant woman comes

near them she'll miscarry and lose the child." Andrea pushes

their voices away. Her grandmother. And now she. And what else besides remembering events before they happen? She jumps off the corral. Walks to The Windmill. The rough tiles under her hands and feet feel immensely thick and deep. They can plumb the center of the world. Now she's on the platform under the blade and must be wary of wind change—it wouldn't do to get rapped on the head by the sails, by anything. She has to—no, not think, just allow the quiet to seep into her body and wait for the flash to strike 'the knowing.' Today. Zenobio. Her land. Her people. The people not as much hers as the land. Beyond

the lagoon is the monte where the cattle shelter, nibbling mesquite pods or what grass they can find. ("*You will go through this ceremony, cabezona.*") The dark clouds are looming nearer. North of the house, to the right, are three lone dark green cedars. Quiet sentinels watching over the land. Always watching. Half a dozen vehicles are parked under them. Some of the guests disembark from old Fords and Chryslers. A Willys Jeep, a relic from the war that has just ended, had earlier emptied a large family from tiny tots to aged grandparents like a tree at first light vacating chickens that have roosted there all night. A few guests had arrived on horseback. ("*You have to go through with it. You don't want to end up a solterona like your aunt Ramona?*") Don Efraín had driven his '41 Lincoln Continental Coupé. He gives more care to it than he does his family. He is seen spitting on it then shining out the spots of dirt with the shirt tail under his forearm, is heard whispering love words to it. The platform

trembles. Andrea blinks. Expands. The other Andrea flows down, down. The men are talking of something else now. "No one can imagine. It was so long ago. That kind of quake, thrown to the ground. The earth became a crazy dancer. It was as if a dissident orchestra had mutinied and each musician had played a different song. So long ago when the Indians were free." Back. Looking

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down she sees it's only her Uncle Efraín scaling up. His arm muscles taut. Her own muscles taut. The fingers grasping the ladder become her fingers. She is beside her uncle. "You shouldn't pretend to be younger and stronger than you are," she tells him, stretching out her hand to help him.

"You're not supposed to know that," he says ignoring her hand. He gives a little hop and lands his scrawny buttocks on the platform. "Saying truths is not the thing to do, hija. People won't stand for it and men will always try to impress you, you know that."

"Why do they have to always prove themselves?" she asks.

"Sepa dios. Qué te pasa? Your mamá said you were being difficult."

"Difficult is the only way I *can* be with her. It's all this fuss and bother. I can't decide." Andrea remains silent for a while.

"There's nothing to decide, it's all been decided for you. Like it was for me. I wouldn't go through with it a second time, though. Not for all the land in The Valley. Why in my time...." Andrea stops listening. The land, people married for it.

"It's peaceful here, like being in another world," says Andrea. "Or another self."

"You're right, hija. It's a tiny island floating above everything."

"That was a nice gift you brought us, Tío. It must have taken you weeks to carve it."

"It took me months. Yes, that paisano was a long time coming. But how I loved working on it. Couldn't get it right until I got the idea of carving a base for it. For balance. Had to send my boys out into the brush. They came back with enough cowhorns to make a dozen roadrunners and enough bones for mija to paint on for months." His daughter had presented Andrea with a cow pelvic bone with a small hole and a thin strip of cowhide with which to hang it around her neck. On the bone carved and painted: The Mesquite with The Windmill in the background. Andrea puts her hand between her breasts. The bone is warm.

"You've got that look in your eye, my girl. What you need is some cerveza." They climb down.

Andrea takes her beer, which she isn't supposed to be drinking—the frown on her aunts' faces and the male guests' eyes tell her.

Andrea takes her beer to the corral and places it on a post.

Andrea is not anywhere near the corral or a post.

Andrea places her beer on the post where it rocks a bit but doesn't topple. She looks at the women. Andrea does not look

at the women. The bridesmaids, wide pink skirts (they wear identical dresses) swirling around their calves, cast coquettish looks at one muchacho or another as they traffic among the tables ladling out chunks of carne asada, arroz con pollo, and papas con frijoles, serving beer or lemonade or chocolate. Not much to say for their lot until they learn to say no. (*Andrea's bouquet sails into the sun over the heads of the shrieking bridesmaids. Sweat pours down their faces. The flowers hit one girl in the face. Clutching them, she scrambles away laughing. The men will get hit in the face, too. Later. "Así son las cosas, mi'jita," her mother would say everytime Andrea complained of the restrictions marriage imposes on people.*) She hasn't eaten since yesterday noon, but that's not why it

happens. That López girl has nice tits and her... Andrea blinks. Andrea leaves

herself—the self that sits atop the corral. The men sit on the bales of hay in their stiff dark cotton suits eating, their felt stetsons on the ground beside them or hanging from the mesquite branches. Some are rolling or smoking their Bugler and drinking, discussing the drought. Now one talks of the quarantine of his cattle by the government, another cuts in with the movidas del compadre Juan. One signals to her but she pretends not to see—feeling guilty for the pretense, wanting to hit him in the face. It's only when they're bunched up in herds, alone not one of them would dare look her in the eye. Zenobio brings her a plate of food and leaves before she can say anything. She doesn't touch it—she's no longer there. The músicos are feeding their music with whiskey, fueling the songs' fire before the dance begins, their instruments beside them on the ground

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like crippled birds. As she picks up her beer her hands start to tingle. The flow of liquid down her throat feels like a wind

milling down her middle. Her hands are fluid. Where does the edge of the glass end and her mouth begin? Then she tries to define the "feeling" but can't and becomes afraid. She smiles. Yes, when she wants to be *gone*, to be *that*, all she has to do is look carefully, focus steadily on something and she takes leave

of herself. The women sit taking turns talking about what their offspring do, what their maridos say. They seem to rush through their words in a desperate attempt to make up for the seclusion of their lives. Funerals and weddings, the only events that bring them together. Their men and children. Andrea wants to run away. She wants to run to her grandmother and kneeling before her, bury her face in her ample thighs, smell the smell. (*Why? Because the fourth finger of the left hand is the least active finger of the hand least used. But I'm left-handed!*) Her grandmother is sitting on the Windsor chair that Andrea has taken out of the house for her. She sits near but not with the women. Andrea feels removed from the women, from everyone. It seems that she inhabits a space that is not there, one impervious to the bodies milling around her, to the food and laughter. There. But not there. Here. But not here. Hearing, yet deaf to the chortles that follow the jokes, the tittering of the young in the backyard. Motionless, feeling nothing, thinking nothing, rooted to the post, not even seeming to breathe. (*But señorita, you must find your certificate of baptism. I never was baptised because I never was born. Mamagrande gave birth to me in her kettle. Mamá's baby was born dead. I was put in its place so she wouldn't grieve its death. Stop it, Andrea. Don't listen to her, Father, she likes to make jokes.*) A world lay in that smell. She would not cook for the man, nor bear his dark moods and snotty children. She would not bolster his spirits when the cattle died off like flies, nor his balls when he dried up. Zenobio is not like the others, he would accept this. Another world lies out there. Perhaps she could be her

self out there. "Fue un escándalo," she had overheard. "Sleeping naked with la serpiente. A huge rattler. A diamond back, the most vicious killer of them all. Her henna hair wild over her body, her body glistening, the serpent entwined around her middle, its head peering from her pubic patch, its dry scaly tail rubbing the silk of her. She lavishes on her pet the warmth she cannot lavish on a man." Rubbing the depression on each side of its

snout, between eye and nostril. Bíbora loved that. She would take its tail between her hands and study its hollow, ring-like bulbs at the tail entering the biggest ring and the other rings gradually diminishing in size, each opening to its neighbor. Several times a year, it would shed its skin. A new one would form beneath the old one. Then the old one would be sloughed off. But not completely. It would retain something of the old skin. The old tail sheath would remain loosely fitting over the new one. With each molting another joint would be added. Some would wear away with time. If only she could shed her old skin and grow a new one as easily. She loved to feel the rapid vibrations of the tail. She'd had it since it was a baby, no longer than a foot long and thin as a tapeworm. Now it was over eight feet long and as thick as her thigh. Now she had to keep it outside in the nopal thicket—everyone in the house was terrified of it. That she had such a pet her family and the neighbors could accept more readily than the fact that the snake always returned after its nightly excursions. Even after weeks of absence. The people could stomach

her taming wild bulls and mad dogs but not a snake. On one of the tables, a head of a steer, pit barbecued, is spiraling steam out of its dull gaping

eyes up toward the branches of The Mesquite. She smells the rich odor, too rich. It's as if her nose were buried in the head. Revulsion pinches her gut. Surely it's not one of her favorites. The wild ones sometimes get caught, too. Her mother had gotten up at three in the morning, spicing it, wrapping it in burlap, burying it in the ground, and covering it with live coals. It has slowly simmered for ten hours. Don Sebastián, it was told, had taken the entrails of one

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of his dead cows into his kitchen and laying the bowels over a gridiron had lighted the stove murmuring, "That will make the bruja real hot." Hombre. Why does he fear us? The more female we are the more he fears us. Is it our strength or our

tenderness he fears? The only way not to alarm him is to acquiesce and allow him to lock us up in a room. A will indifferent to his own he cannot abide. How dare we have wills. He wants us to mother him, give him pleasure, grant all his wishes and ask for nothing. Someone puts

a hand on her shoulder. (*God made them male and female.*) Without looking she knows it's Zenobio. What Zenobio fears is her power to evoke in him the naked helplessness of his being. The power to make him aware that he has no control over that feeling. *That* to him is betrayal. But she never takes advantage of him when he is the most exposed. He knows I never will, Andrea thinks, yet.... Zenobio grins, puts a pomegranate in her hand then disappears. She blinks. The pink, blue, and white frosted cake lies in the middle of the center table. Looking at the stiff figures of the novia y novio smiling inanely on top. She already feels herself becoming stiff. She touches her arm to reassure herself. Pan de polvo, empanadas de calabaza and pitchers of hot chocolate lie by the cake awaiting la merienda. (*She stands at Zenobio's right hand. The madrinas and padrinos stand behind.*) Tall glass vases with huge red and white roses from her grandmother's jardín flank each end of the table. The stain,

the chocolate stain disfigures the white lace tablecloth.

Hearing a burst of laughter, Andrea looks down the length of the corral.

Hearing laughter, Andrea refuses to look up.

Andrea looks up. The younger men congregate at one end of the corral. Astride posts, legs dangling, bottoms squirming, they pummel each others' arms as they trade witty nonsenses. She might as well be sitting right

next to them. Secretive whispers, boasts of prowess at roping, at riding, at fucking the canti-

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virulently sexist in their treatment of Black women writers as their white male counterparts. Darwin Turner's discussion of Zora Neale Hurston in his *In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity* is a frightening example of the near assassination of a great Black woman writer.[10] His descriptions of her and her work as "artful," "coy," "irrational," "superficial," and "shallow" bear no relationship to the actual quality of her achievements. Turner is completely insensitive to the sexual political dynamics of Hurston's life and writing.

In a recent interview the notoriously misogynist writer, Ishmael Reed, comments in this way upon the low sales of his newest novel:

> ...but the book only sold 8000 copies. I don't mind giving out the figure: 8000. Maybe if I was one of those young *female* Afro-American writers that are so hot now, I'd sell more. You know, fill my books with ghetto women who can *do no wrong*.... But come on, I think I could have sold 8000 copies by myself.[11]

The politics of the situation of Black women are glaringly illuminated by this statement. Neither Reed nor his white male interviewer has the slightest compunction about attacking Black women in print. They need not fear widespread public denunciation since Reed's statement is in perfect agreement with the values of a society that hates Black people, women and Black women. Finally the two of them feel free to base their actions on the premise that Black women are powerless to alter either their political or cultural oppression.

In her introduction to "A Bibliography of Works Written by American Black Women" Ora Williams quotes some of the reactions of her colleagues toward her efforts to do research on Black women. She writes:

> Others have reacted negatively with such statements as, "I really don't think you are going to find very much written," "Have 'they' written anything that is any good?" and "I wouldn't go overboard with this woman's lib thing." When discussions touched on the possibility of teaching a course in which emphasis would be on the literature by Black women, one response was, "Ha, ha. That will certainly be the most nothing course ever offered!"[12]

neras. They ogle the girls, most often the López girl. A few eye the horses in their beautiful sleek flesh snorting water from the trough or standing stiff-legged, tails swishing off flies. (*As is required, I will instruct you in the doctrine. Now, the nature of marriage is obedience....*) This marriage will save us from having to marry, she thinks. She hears the thud of knives that a couple of adolescent boys are throwing at a tree stump out of sight in the backyard. José Manuel had better not come around smirking. The "bullseye" from one of the boys drowns out the laughter of the guests. A young boy tears across the backyard chased by an enraged tom turkey. The boy runs into the rope that some girls are jumping and sprawls amid skirts and squeals and slaps. Soft bodies and soft hands slap

Andrea. She ducks, then looks around furtively to see if anyone is looking. She'll have to burn prickly pear and mesquite pods to feed the cattle this summer if the rains don't come. Everyone will be upset, not so much at her doing a man's work but for doing it better. A group of screeching children surround a boy in a yellow shirt dangling a string attached to the head of a horned toad over a heap of swarming red ants. The horned toad squirms, body convulsing. The piercing pain in

her arms and hands almost shocks her into crying out. She rolls up her sleeves. The red spots on her arms were made from climbing The Windmill, from the splinters. And those on the back of her hands? Finally a boy in a purple shirt scatters the children and releases the horned toad. The toad scuttles out of sight under some nopales. (*The two altar boys carry the vessel of holy water to the altar, the sprinkler, and the little basin that will hold the ring. The priest walks behind them.*)

"Hijita! Get off of there. A fine hostess you are." Andrea looks down. Her mother again, arms crossed, a scowl on her face.

"I want to be alone, 'Amá."

"Andrea de la Cruz, get down and go greet the Flores." The pearls around her neck bubble up and down. "They've just arrived—late as usual."

"They shouldn't have bothered."

"Pórtate bien, Andrea. You must stop this bickering with your cousin."

"All right, but I didn't start it, he did, and if he makes a wrong move I'm going to flatten him." Andrea leaps off raising a little cloud of dust from which her mother backs off, the scowl, a permanent feature now.

"It's not good for women to quarrel with men, especially about...well, it's just not good."

"You mean it's not good for women to have opinions on anything. In fact it's not good for women to do anything."

The Flores approach and she greets them, but turns away from José Manuel's smirk and outstretched arms.

"Here's your wedding gift," he says smiling. She remains silent. He drops the cage he was holding out to her at her feet, almost on her toes. "The paisano will bring you good fortune." He's still smiling. Andrea stares at the bronzy green reflections in the bird's plumage.

"I have already received my good fortune." A weasel in his smile. What had ever possessed Zenobio? It's not like José Manuel has been the only other one. There's Pete and Mando. (*I hereby proclaim the coming nuptials of Andrea de la Cruz and Zenobio Ríos. Those who wish to bring to light any obstacles that stand in the way of this union, let them come forward. This pre-nuptial announcement will also be made during the next two misas as befits canon law.*)

"No one can have too much of a good thing," says José Manuel, weasel mustache twitching. "Fried paisano is a remedio for the itch, or so they say." Someone snickers.

"A caged thing never brings anyone luck, least of all the one who captures it," says Andrea.

"How do you like that for thanks," says José Manuel, ears flattening against his skull as he surveys the guests that have bunched up around them. All avoid his beady eyes. It is to Andrea that they always come when they're short of money or water or feed for their cattle. At other times, when their cows go dry, they whisper behind her back, say that fulano saw her cast a stone over her left shoulder

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toward the west. Or that once she made midnight of high noon. Andrea looks men full in the face. Andrea looks

fully at him, her eyes absorb the hostility emanating from him. Her body full of it. And he knows. He and Zenobio. Innocent, trusting Zenobio. Then "the betrayal" as Zenobio dramatically called it when he told her about it. And she even more stupid—she should have warned Zenobio. Poor Zenobio, duped, seduced, betrayed. She would never forget his pain. Andrea blinks and says, "You are not welcome here." She is herself again.

"I'm always welcome at the house of my aunt."

"Make any trouble and I'll boot you off of my land."

"Your land? You're a woman—or are you? Women don't inherit."

"V'aber pedo. A fight, a fight," the boy in the yellow shirt chants. José Manuel pushes her once. Twice. As he tries to push her a third time she takes a knife out of her jeans and his hand

runs into it. Shocked, he backs off staring at the blood dripping from his hand. Don Efraín pushes his way through the group. "Now, now, now," he says putting his arm around Andrea and turning her around. Complete silence, all eyes riveted on the blood dripping.

"Consider Zenobio," Don Efraín whispers moving her away while at the same time José Manuel's brother takes José Manuel's arm and pulls him toward the *portal*. José Manuel muttering, "Should have given her the yerba—would of cured the chingadera out of her." A small squeak. Hand on his throat and gagging. He turns and looks at her, rust in his mouth, eyes wide with fear. In the future I will not need a knife, she thinks. She stands

holding the cage at eye level with both hands. The paisano cocks its head to one side, then the other, looking at her through first one eye then the other. Killer of rattlers. Killer of alacranes and tarantulas. The bird blinks its fierce eye, film clouding and unclouding it. The bare patch of vivid blue and red skin behind the eye fascinates her. The bird blinks again, the eye clears then films. Clear then clouded, un-

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clouded then filmed, over and over and over. The *feeling*, and a tingling in her hands. The boy in the purple shirt watches her. She opens

the cage door. A beautiful cage made of bleached dry twigs and grass stems. It doesn't move. Just the eye. Clouding and unclouding. The paisano takes off down the backroad in a streak so fast it seems to be skimming over the ground, long legs churning, tail flat. The road forks out to the right and another branch to the left. Andrea silently urges the paisano to cross the right road from left to right. Squatting, she looks at the track, two toes pointing forward, two toes pointing backward—to mislead the evil spirits people say. (*Cállate el hocico, Zenobio. You've asked me what time it is a hundred times in the last five minutes. Cálmate, she'll be here on time.*) She looks toward the north, clenches her fist and concentrates. Lightning flashes in the north. She counts slowly and when she gets to seven there is a low rumble. She begins to count again and at seven the wind comes sweeping over the rancho. Andrea turns to find the boy in the purple shirt looking at her. "Will you teach me how to do that?" he asks. Both smile. Andrea looks for Zenobio. He's not in the house. He's not with José Manuel. He's with his mother on one of the benches that have been set up to accommodate the Flores. The benches, she notices, close off

the circle. He's standing by the wedding cake laughing at something Don Efraín is saying. They stand close together. Don Efraín never should have married. It's not too late, she thinks. Not too late. Not too late. "Oh, there you are, Corazón," says Don Efraín, putting his arm over Andrea's shoulder. "Oyes, paisana. I was just telling your hombre here how lucky you are."

"Ya lo sé." She doesn't want to hear anymore about 'luck.' "I'm bailing him out. And myself. We're rescuing each other, for now anyway."

"What nonsense you talk sometimes, hijita. You sound more and more like your mamagrande every day. Be careful. People do not tolerate what's different." Zenobio doesn't seem put out by their conversation, she thinks, annoyed with herself and

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everyone. She's never seen him flustered or even self-conscious. He always looks beautiful. She looks at Don Efraín and studies the sombrero in his hand. The small holes around the crown form a pattern of inverted squares inside of which more holes bisect their angles to form a cross. Sun wrinkles spread outward around the eyes gazing at her. Why, he's chuckling at our situation. And pitying it, she realizes. A lizard scurries out from

between her legs. She is partial to lizards. (*Lo cagamos, the ring doesn't fit, says Zenobio. You didn't think it would, did you? It's not supposed to fit. Nothing is supposed to fit so don't start expecting things to, she tells him.*) "Some more mescal, Tío?"

"Yes, but I'll get it. I know you want to be alone to fight with your 'novio,'" he says, accentuating the novio. The music starts. The men begin moving all the tables to make room for the dancing. Everyone turns to look at Andrea and Zenobio. Don Efraín is there beside them, urging them to the center of the *portal* saying, "The bride and groom always start the first dance."

"I don't want to dance with him. Nothing personal, Zeno."

"Cagada, let's get it over with," says Zenobio, putting his arm around her. They stand motionless, freeze a smile for the photographer. They are waltzing smoothly. Her hands on his thin shoulders, his bony hands on her waist. (*For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body....*) She is a substanceless body doing the courting being courted. He is a substanceless body doing the courting being courted.

"Why are you looking at me that way?"

"I feel like not going through with it," she says.

"'Tas loca. It's the night before."

"I don't see the point of it. Just why are we doing this. So we won't have to go through a 'real' marriage? We're being hooked into it. Into doing what's 'done.'" She looks around. Others are dancing. The waltz becomes a polka, a foot-tapping, dust-raising Texas Mexican polka full of ahua's. Andrea walks away, Zenobio follows. They stand on the sidelines

watching the dancers. Everyone, old and young, is dancing. The girls left without partners are trying to cajole their young brothers into dancing with them. Two seven-year-old girls dance with each other. Andrea walks up to the López girl who's been turning down man after man, all bunched up around her like cattle around a salt lick, tongues falling out.

"Ven. Baila conmigo." The López girl smiles, her teeth gleam as Andrea takes her into her arms and whirls her around the circle. Andrea's head is full of the music. The strings of the guitar twang inside her skull. The beat becomes her heart beat, opening her, widening her diaphragm, her hips expanding. Only the tune exists and Belinda López. Throbbing. Her pelvis makes circles around Belinda's navel. She shakes her head and blinks, lips glisten, jaw falls slack. Her spine is undulating. Gradually, she notices that most of the dancing couples have taken root right in the middle of the *portal* and are staring at the two women, lips thinned and whitening.

"Stop, let go," says Belinda López, teeth whiter than ever.

"Aw come on, you like it."

"Yes. But we're not supposed to."

"I'm tired of the millions of things we're not supposed to do," says Andrea.

"Well, you're the only one that can get away with doing things we're not supposed to do."

"Ay chulita, I'll tell you my secret. I just do them."

"But you're different. They're scared of you. Andrea la Bruja, they call you behind your back, making the sign of the cross when they say your name," she says. She breaks from Andrea's hold, running out of the circle of petrified eyes. Her palpitating breasts affront the men and bring a look of envy to the women's eyes.

Andrea walks back to Zenobio. "Qué pendejada fue ésa, Andrea?"

"I did it because I wanted to just like you want to dance with the boy in the purple shirt staring at you," she says.

"What I want and what I do are two different things."

"You're beginning to sound like them," Andrea

from ***conditions:8*** 1982

says pointing her head at the guests. "Oh, let's stop squabbling."

"OK, I know what you're thinking. You want to run off and leave me," he says. "But we need each other, Andrea. We understand each other. No one else does. We have to stay together." And when she makes no reply, he says, "Take me with you." They put their arms around each other. The image of a tumbleweed wrapped around a post with the wind whirling past is in her mind. But who is the tumbleweed and who the post? Over Zenobio's shoulder appears the frowning face

of her mother, Andrea feels a vague sense of guilt, a diffused disloyalty. The warmth and affection and love that is her mother's due she lavishes on her grandmother, on Zenobio, on Bíbora, on the land.

"I wish we hadn't started building our own home yet," she tells him.

"It'll be finished in a month, then we'll have some privacy."

"You don't know my mother."

"Querida, it won't matter. We can put up with her for a month. And she with us."

"Or, we can skip out. It's not just her, Zeno, it's me. And it's you. We don't fit here. So maybe we won't fit anywhere else, but maybe we will. Maybe there's a place for people like us somewhere."

"You mean in the white world?"

"I don't know. Zenobio, don't look like that."

"I want you to stop talking like this. I'm hungry. Let's go eat."

"You go, I'm not hungry. I'm going to talk to Mamagrande."

Her grandmother is sitting on a bench under The Windmill, arms on her lap, quietly rocking.

"I was waiting for you, mi'jita." They remain silent. Silence—their way of talking. Finally her grandmother says, "It's a closeness, a connection."

"Yes," says Andrea, "with people and things. But only with certain people and certain things at certain times. It's frightening."

"Only because it's new and unfamiliar. Soon it will become comfortable and in time indispensable."

"I don't mean *that*. I mean others' fear of it and my fear of their fear. Why do I seem evil to them?"

"Because you are wholly yourself. *That* terrifies people who are prisoners of others' upbringing, who are molded by others," says her grandmother.

"I don't know what to believe. It's terrible! I don't want it. It means being alone."

"Which? Tu poder o tu querer?"

"Both. Don't the two go together, Mamagrande?" asks Andrea.

Andrea walks back toward the *portal*, then turns to go back to the corral. A small group has gathered around José Manuel. He playfully puts a pair of pants over a heifer's head, one of the ladinas. He opens the gate and hits her sharply on the shanks. Blinded she whirls around and around trying to shake off the cloth over her eyes. Frightened and enraged she runs straight toward Andrea. From the guests—an audible sucking in of air. The heifer is almost on top of Andrea. Andrea jerks the pants off her horns. The animal stops dead in her tracks, wild-eyed spewing rivulets of saliva. Andrea whispers to her and walks into the corral. The wild heifer follows her meekly. Andrea turns and locks the gate. The circle is complete. She ignores the remarks addressed to her repeating to herself, It is not a sickness, nor is it evil. Another melody attaches to the first—I must do it I must do it. An incantation to ward off.... A white glare

lays over everything like a fine dust. Another world, a different one, superimposed over the normal one. The land, the people, everything takes on a fused quality. Like figures carved out of the same white rock. What was it like before? Where's the Andrea that left her bed that morning? What was the dream about that woke her up?

She is standing on the banks of a river holding a bucket. She fishes by dropping it into the water and scooping it up. At first she catches a big beautiful paisano. She knows it's a rare one. She throws it back into the river. It metamorphoses into Bíbora, her pet snake. Bíbora stands on the water flicking her tongue, then with a rattle of her tail, turns and swims for the shore. Once on land, she crawls

toward the west. Andrea wakes up saying to herself, a dream about my future.

She hurries back to the *portal* and sits down beside Zenobio. (*And the two shall become one. And they shall be one flesh.*) Who has multiplied and his several selves fan out around him like cards held in a hand. The physical Zenobio draws the others. (*I pronounce you man and....*) These others are Zenobios that she's never met. She feels a tightness in her head and a great wind in her bones.

"Pa'donde vas?" Zenobio asks when she starts to leave.

"Away from here."

She finds herself once more on top of The Windmill. She doesn't remember climbing up.

The world gradually settles down around her, forming a different rockbed. There is nothing that she can compare the feeling with—except maybe dreams. She puts her hands on her temples and presses hard. It must all be part of what could have been or what is, she thinks. The vane now points toward the west. I am that I am. The paisano is a bird of good omen. She descends

from The Windmill and walks slowly to the *portal*. She dips a broom sprig in water. A fine rain begins to fall. The feathers of an eagle consume all other feathers if they're mixed together. Leaning against the gnarled Mesquite, hair touching some of its leaves, she begins to bid the guests goodbye.

from ***conditions:8*** 1982

MY CAREER AS A THIEF

Dorothy Allison

I have been so hungry my hands would not stay still. In the bad times when I was a kid, my mama made flour and water biscuits with flour, water and fat gravy to pour over them. Sometimes with it she'd serve a bowl of tomato soup or maybe pork and beans. We joked about liking such stuff cold out of the can, but I remember that it was cold because the power company had turned the house off—no money in the mail, no electricity. That was hunger wrapped around a starch belly. The worst time, there was nothing, not even flour to make up the pretense of a meal. We sat around, my sisters and I grumbling over our rumbling bellies. My mama laughed at us, making so much noise over such a little thing. She told us about real hunger, hunger of days with no expectation that there would ever be biscuits again, days when she'd cried with it, only one of eleven hungry kids. She got us to go off to play, made us laugh with her imitations of her brothers and sisters fighting. But I stayed back to watch her, to see her fingers ridge up into fists and her chin stand out in anger. When my stepfather came back, she was just like a big angry mama hen, feathers up and eyes yellow.

"Not my kids," she told him, "I never wanted my kids to know what it was like. I won't have them hungry."

She outlined her mouth in bold red lipstick, then combed back her dark blond hair and hung her big old purse on one arm. She went out the door, her waitress shoes slapping on the steps, not even looking back to see what he would do. She came back with money, with flour, with the makings of an evening breakfast. My stepfather sat in the living room and didn't say a word, but I saw the hunger in his eyes as clear as the rage in mama's. His hands on his thighs kept moving, the fingers working. I curled mine, I rubbed my leg muscles. The biscuits didn't fill me. I stayed hungry.

from ***conditions:9*** 1983

A remark by Alice Walker capsulizes what all the preceding examples indicate about the position of Black women writers and the reasons for the damaging criticism about them. She responds to her interviewer's question, "Why do you think that the black woman writer has been so ignored in America? Does she have even more difficulty than the black male writer, who perhaps has just begun to gain recognition?" Walker replies:

> There are two reasons why the black woman writer is not taken as seriously as the black male writer. One is that she's a woman. Critics seem unusually ill-equipped to intelligently discuss and analyze the works of black women. Generally, they do not even make the attempt; they prefer, rather, to talk about the lives of black women writers, not about what they write. And, since black women writers are not—it would seem—very likable—until recently they were the least willing worshippers of male supremacy—comments about them tend to be cruel.[13]

A convincing case for Black feminist criticism can obviously be built solely upon the basis of the negativity of what already exists. It is far more gratifying, however, to demonstrate its necessity by showing how it can serve to reveal for the first time the profound subtleties of this particular body of literature.

Before suggesting how a Black feminist approach might be used to examine a specific work I will outline some of the principles that I think a Black feminist critic could use. Beginning with a primary commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writing, she would also work from the assumption that Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition. The breadth of her familiarity with these writers would have shown her that not only is theirs a verifiable historical tradition that parallels in time the tradition of Black men and white women writing in this country, but that thematically, stylistically, aesthetically and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social and economic experience they have been

We always lived at a distance from the rest of the family. My stepfather chose houses in the suburbs that we couldn't keep. The landlords would come to the front door calling my mama's name and I would stand there to call back to them.

"She's not to home. I can't let you in, my mama's not to home."

They'd yell, threaten, beat on the door. In the back of the house, my mama would sit with a cigarette between her fingers, pushing her hair straight back from her face, saying nothing until they left. Then she'd hug me, praise me. "My smart little girl." Soon then, we'd move to another house, another suburb, eventually the outer edges of the town, almost country. My stepfather's family lived in big houses they owned, with fenced-in yards and garden bushes. My mama's people moved as often as we did, but to rambling old frame houses where the dogs could hide under the floorboards. Uncle Nevin and Aunt Carr got a place built on such a steep hill that we could play in the dirt under the front porch and not even reach the porch boards at a jump. The back was set so deep into the hill that the dogs couldn't even dig out from under it. I loved that house, the cool dimness under the porch, but my stepfather hated it.

"Don't they care how they're living?" He wouldn't put us in such a house, he insisted. So he found us cinder block houses where the tile floors were always peeling up from the damp and where, never mind, we didn't stay long. But a decent neighborhood, he told mama. Mama said nothing, just unpacked the dishes one more time.

When I was eight my Aunt Dot moved her brood of kids into an apartment building, a second floor frame walkup with a wide porch hanging off one side. Nobody else we knew had ever lived in an apartment. An apartment then was special and mama took us over to visit. With Dot's kids we made an even dozen to play up and down those shaky stairs, getting splinters in our hands and thighs. Down in the dirt yard there were other kids, colored kids, who watched us. It was a week before we started playing with them, they with us.

"Niggers," my uncles cursed. "Living in this trashy place with niggers!"

My aunt laughed at them. "Yeah, and paying my own rent thank you. Hell, here I can even pay it a few days late and not find my ass back out on the street." The uncles still complained but my aunt seemed to ignore it. "Find me better," was all she said. "Find me better."

We thought it was a great place, better than many of the others she'd been. It had, at least, indoor toilets. And those kids knew games we hadn't played yet, curse words no uncles had yet used and, more importantly, none of them were as rough as the boy cousins with their broken bottles and sharp rocks. None of us were pleased when Aunt Dot finally moved. "Nobody's business," she said. But it made too much trouble, people always coming around to complain.

She got a house downtown, a house so old and weathered the second floor had to be locked off as unsafe. Some people wondered how she was paying the rent, but there was no question where the food on the table was coming from. The boys brought it in, the twins then just thirteen, Bill's other "wife's" boy just eleven and little Butch just eight. They fanned out into the streets in the early morning and started coming home by afternoon, loaded down with stolen produce from local gardens, canned goods palmed in the little corner groceries—one or two from each store. "Have the sense to spread it out," they told me. Sugar they got from the diner on the truck highway and mustard or ketchup from the one near the high school.

"White Horse Road's best," my favorite cousin, Grey, told me. "Seems like every diner on White Horse Road's got those easy to steal plastic ketchup bottles, and all their sugar in little paper packets. It's hard you know to get out with one of those glass sugar dishes. They're just too big to hide."

"Horseshit," his twin, Blue, insisted. While Grey's name really was Grey, Blue was actually Garvey though no one had called him anything but Blue since he was four. "I tell you you can steal anything if you set your mind to it. I tell you the day's gonna

come when I bring mama home a 22-inch TV set, that I an't gonna spend a penny on. You just got to think out how to do it, and then stealing's the easiest thing in the world."

I nodded and tried to watch how they did it. The hunger in me craved more than sugar or ketchup, or canned goods out of some dirty little grocery. When mama took us into town to Penney's or Montgomery Ward's my fingers would start to ache and my mouth water. Stacks of things around me made me think about the empty coal grate in our bedroom, the broken couch propped up with a brick, milk spoiling in the warm refrigerator. With mama there, it seemed the only thing I could do was run my hands over things, finger the sheets and glassware and use my nails to tear little holes in clothes I knew we couldn't buy. It was wanting what I couldn't have, I knew, that made me want to be so mean.

"Don't you ever let me catch any of you stealing," mama insisted. "You want something, you tell me and if it's worth the trouble, we'll find a way. But I an't gonna have no child of mine caught stealing." I took her at her word and went out with my cousins, planning not to get caught and not to tell her. But one afternoon when I produced Tootsie Rolls for my sisters, mama took my hands in hers like she was going to cry.

"Where'd you get them?"

"Bo?" I said.

"No," she cried.

"Aunt Dot," I said.

"Don't lie too." The lines in her face looked as deep as the rivers that flowed toward Charleston. "Tell me the truth."

I started to cry and told her, "Downtown, the Woolworth's counter."

She wiped my face. She wiped her own. "Is this all of it? How much did you eat?"

"Two others, mama. I ate one and I gave Bobbie one."

She wrapped it all in a bag and put some pennies in my hand, washed my face again and walked me downtown. All the way down she was quiet, but

when we got there she turned to me, said, "I don't like this." She shook her head. "But there an't no other way to do it. You're my pride, you and your sisters, and I can't have you shaming us."

She walked me straight back to the candy counter, waited for the counter girl to come over and stood me right in front of her. "My daughter has something to tell you," she said and gave me a little push.

But I couldn't speak. I held out the bag and the pennies and started to cry again. The girl looked confused but mama wouldn't speak, and I thought I'd strangle on my own tongue when the manager walked over toward us.

"What's this?" he said real loud. "What's this? You got omething for us, little girl?" He was a big man with a wide face and a wide belly poking out from under one of those button-up vests. He stooped down so that his face was right in front of me, so close I could smell the sharp alcohol scent of after-shave. "You do, doncha honey?" He looked like he was swallowing an urge to laugh at us. I was suddenly so angry at him, my stomach seemed to curl up inside me. I shoved the bag at him, the money.

"I'm sorry. I stole it."

Mama's hand squeezed on my shoulder and I heard the breath come out of her in a sigh. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying hard not to let myself get mad at her.

"Uh huh," the man said, "I see." I looked at him again. He was rummaging in the bag, counting the Tootsie Rolls and nodding. "It's a good thing, mam," he said, still talking loud, "that you've caught this when you did." He nodded at me. "You're a fortunate little girl, truly fortunate. Your mama loves you. She doesn't want you to grow up to be a thief."

He stood up and passed the pennies to the salesgirl. He moved like he was going to put his hand on my head but I stepped back. "Son-of-a-Bitch," Grey would have called him. "Slimy son-of-a-bitch probably eats Tootsie Rolls all day long." If he reached for me again, I'd bite him, but he didn't. He just looked at me long and carefully.

"I'm gonna do your mama a favor, help her to teach you the seriousness of what you've done."

Mama's hand tightened again on my shoulder but still she didn't speak. "What we're gonna do," he announced, "is say you can't come back here for a while. We'll say that when your mama thinks you've learned your lesson, she can come back and talk to me. But till then, we're gonna remember your name, what you look like. You understand me, honey?"

I understood. I understood that at nine I was barred from the Woolworth's counters. I could feel the heat from my mama's hand through my blouse and I knew she was never gonna come near this place again, was never gonna let herself stand in the same room with this honey-greased bastard. I looked around at the bright hairbrushes, ribbons, trays of panties and hose, notebooks, dolls and balloons. It was hunger I felt then and everytime I passed their window, a hunger edged with hatred and a raw lust to hurt them back. Mama said nothing about whipping me or telling my stepfather what I'd done. The trip to Woolworth's had punished both of us more than we could stand.

Getting older, I began to feel that hunger was in the back of the throat, not the belly. It was an ache that throbbed extra sharp when we went to visit my stepfather's people: the uncle the lawyer, the uncle the accountant, the aunts that were all mothers and nothing else, the grandfather that owned the bakery. We went in my parents' proud white Pontiac with the top down and the wind blowing whatever paper scraps had accumulated on the floor. We went for somebody's birthday—a double, one of the uncles and one of his kids.

"One of the *children*," my stepfather's sister, Marvella, said, "kids are billygoats."

Goddamned right, I thought, staring over at my puffy cousin in creased pants, a *kid* of eight, a copy of his fat ugly father. They served us tea in the backyard, just us—"Ruth's girls," they called us. Their kids went in and out of the house, loud, raucous, scratching their nails on the polished furniture, kicking their feet on the hardwood floors, running mud in on the rugs.

"Those little brats need their asses slapped," my

mama said, but not where any of them could hear her. She came out to check on us now and again, where we sat in our starched dresses, as stiff as the sleeves.

"Mama, when we going?"

"Soon," and she'd light a cigarette with shaking hands. She couldn't smoke in their house, though they never came out and told her she couldn't. They just didn't leave ashtrays out. But I saw them go in the kitchen to smoke over the sink and drop their ashes down the drain. Why was it they were pretending they didn't smoke?

"Can't we go home now?"

"No, James wants to show Daddy his new lawnmower."

"I thought he got a new one last year."

"This one's the kind you can ride on while you cut the grass."

"Don't seem like the yard's big enough to need to do that."

"Well," mama gave a short laugh, "I don't really think they buy anything cause they need it." She brushed herself down carefully before going back in, though there wasn't a speck of ash on her.

We sat still, wonderfully behaved. "Yes mam, no mam," we kept our backs straight and never spoke out of turn, trying to be worthy of the roses, the sunlight in their garden. They watched us out of the windows. Behind them, shelves of books and framed pictures mocked me. I stared in at the spines of those books, wanting them all, wanting the polished furniture, the garden, the big open kitchen with its dishes for everyday and dishes for special, the freezer in the utility room and the plushy seats on all the chairs. I couldn't speak around the hunger in my throat. From behind the rosebushes I heard one uncle talking to another.

"Look at that car, just like any niggertrash, choosing something like that."

"What'd you expect? Look at what he married."

"Her and her kids sure go with that car..."

I pushed my hair out of my eyes, looked in at one of my wide-mouthed cousins in a white dress with eyelet sleeves looking back at me, scratching her

nose. What do they tell her about us, I wondered. That we're not really family, just her crazy uncle's wife's nasty kids. You're no relative of mine, I told her and myself. All those new words I'd learned rolled around in my head. To the shock of my sisters, I got up and went for a walk among the roses. I pulled the petals off one at a time and dropped them down inside my dress, pulled up my skirt and tucked them in my panties. I walked slowly around, feeling the plushy soft petals moving against my skin.

Trash steals, I thought but I only took the roses. No amount of hunger would make me take anything else of theirs but looking at everything I could feel a kind of heat behind my eyes. It was dangerous that heat. It wanted to pour out and burn it all up, everything they had that we couldn't have, everything that made them think they were better than us.

"Trash rises," my Aunt Jerrine would say. She lived down by the river, where on summer nights she kept an old tire smoldering in the yard to keep the mosquitos away. She used huge old truck tires from which the smoke rose in a thick black fog. It stank but it kept the mosquitos down. My aunt would wave the fog down toward the river where an amazing collection of things kept accumulating. "It's a good place to live," she'd tell us. "This is where the trash rises," and she'd give out a high hoarse laugh to tell us she was thinking of something more than garbage.

People from Greenville tossed their garbage off the highway a few miles up the river. The garbage would sink out of sight in the mud and eventually work its way down to my aunt's yard to rise and get caught in the roots of the rotting trees that screened her yard. The uncles went to Aunt J's to fish, to stand by the river in the tire smoke, drink whiskey and tell dirty stories. I went to pull in the trash from the tree roots and pick vegetables out of Aunt J's side garden. I'd come home with fresh tomatoes, okra, and the head off a Betsy Wetsy doll, the one with the silly rubber curl on her forehead. I brought back mostly pieces of things—baby carriage covers, tricycle wheels, shoes, plastic dishes, jumprope handles, ragged clothes and once the headlight off a Harley.

from ***conditions:9*** 1983

"This is good stuff," Aunt J usually told me. "You got an *eye* for things, girl. I can clean up and patch those clothes. We'll just soak the dishes in bleach and give the rest of it a scrubbing. Saturday morning, we'll put out blankets and sell it all off the side of the highway. You get your mama to send you over to help me."

It got so my sister, Pam, wanted to help me but she didn't like to get mud on herself so she rarely pulled out anything worth the trouble. Still it was she that saw the hooks—two of them, big four-pronged things still dragging little shreds of rope, with a rusty link chain holding them together.

"Lookit!" she yelled and scared herself, almost sliding down in the mud. "Look there. It's something metal maybe." I climbed out on some of the exposed roots that hung off the bank until I could reach down to the curved metal edge that was showing. It was hard then to untangle the hooks from the muddy trash that lined the weeds and bank. By the time I'd worked it free, I'd slid over and had one leg thigh-deep in the mud.

"You get your ass down here and help me," I yelled at Pam but she had no intention of risking the river. Instead she ran back to find Grey and Blue.

"My sweet Jesus, look at the size of them!" Grey shouted, before we could even get them back up the bank. "That sucker's longer than my arm."

"What is it?"

"It's a hook, a set of hooks."

"Any fool can see that. But what are they for?"

"Mountain climbing." I didn't believe that for a minute but Grey seemed convinced. "Look at the edge on them points. They'd sink into rock with no trouble at all."

"You don't need nothing like that to climb the mountains around here."

"I'll bet some Yankee brought it in not knowing what our mountains are like."

"You an't got the sense you were born with, and even Yankees an't that dumb."

"You calling me stupid?"

"Aw for god's sake."

I got the hooks back in my hands then, before

somebody stabbed himself with one. They were kind of heavy but not so much so that I couldn't imagine swinging one around and throwing it. Grey was right about one thing. The barbs were razor sharp, and not only at the points but also along the edges that curved back on themselves. There was a grey-green gunk all over them that hid most of the metal shine, but that came off easy with a little scraping. In the center of each hook where the four points came together, there was a packed mass of river mud, weeds and fish pieces. I set to scraping it clean and got the boys interested.

"Once we get them cleaned up, I'll show you how mountain climbers use them." Grey was determined to convince everybody that he knew what the hooks were all about, but Blue was having none of it.

"You try throwing that son-of-a-bitch up a tree and you gonna put somebody's eye out when the chain catches on a branch."

"I an't gonna throw it up in no tree," Grey looked disgusted. "I'm gonna use it to pull myself right up the side of Aunt J's house. I'm gonna wave at you from the roof, and then you tell me I'm crazy."

He did it too. The barb dug right into the wood below the roof and gouged deep enough to support his weight. Though once he got up there, Grey couldn't swing around to get a leg over the roof after all. Blue tried it next and had the same problem. He managed to hang onto a roof beam while he worked it loose and tossed it down.

"We'll aim it at the roof this time," he told us, "and then we can climb over the edge using the rope."

"You'll do no such thing." It was Aunt J who'd come up behind us while we were all looking at Blue. "You trying to kill one of these children?" Then she looked up and saw the hole the hook had gouged in her wall.

"Oh my god in heaven!" She grabbed for the hook Blue was holding. "You digging holes in my house! You planning to just walk off and leave it like that, I expect. Goddamn, you kids got no sense at all." She jerked the other hook with its loose flapping chain out of Grey's hands. "I'm surprised you an't killed

each other already. No, what's surprising is that *I* an't killed you already."

"It an't that deep a hole," Grey said. "It an't gonna let the rain in."

The color rushed up into Aunt J's face, and I thought for a moment she was going to swing one of those hooks into his belly. The other kids took off at a run and Grey stumbled back out of her reach.

"You crazy little bastard," she hissed at him. She turned around and grabbed my arm. "All of you. Don't you know what this is?" She waved the tines near my face. "You think it's a big old fish hook? Well it an't. It's for trawling, for dragging. You go down in the river and they'll use something like this to pull you out. They'll drag you up in pieces out of the mud."

The damn thing was, she didn't scare us. It just made the hooks more fascinating. Maybe it hadn't been fish we'd cleaned out of those gaps. But my aunt locked them up in the cellar and it was plain she wasn't going to let us get at them again. I started to dream of the razor points, the steel edges and woke so hungry my teeth ached.

I took to going over to Aunt J's more regularly, hanging out, being helpful. I even spent July pulling weeds and August picking tomatoes, corn and peppers. When canning started, it was just expected that I would be there to boil the mason jars and melt the wax. I brought up the jars from the cellar. I brought up the wax, and when my aunt went out to put her neck under the cool water from the pump, I brought up one of the hooks. I even got it out under the porch before anyone could see, laughing because it was so easy. But mama showed up in the meantime, and was standing waiting in the kitchen over the bubbling vats.

"You want these tomatoes to boil over?" she asked me. "You got to watch this stuff close. You can't be running off in the yard with a fire like this going." She planted me on a stool by the stove, "You sit here and keep your eyes open, little girl."

I got stuck at that stove three days running while

from **conditions:9** 1983

obliged to share. The way, for example, that Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker incorporate the traditional Black female activities of rootworking, herbal medicine, conjure and midwifery into the fabric of their stories is not mere coincidence, nor is their use of specifically Black female language to express their own and their characters' thoughts accidental. The use of Black women's language and cultural experience in books *by* Black women *about* Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures. The Black feminist critic would find innumerable commonalities in works by Black women.

Another principle which grows out of the concept of a tradition and which would also help to strengthen this tradition would be for the critic to look first for precedents and insights in interpretation within the works of other Black women. In other words she would think and write out of her own identity and not try to graft the ideas or methodology of white/male literary thought upon the precious materials of Black women's art. Black feminist criticism would by definition be highly innovative, embodying the daring spirit of the works themselves. The Black feminist critic would be constantly aware of the political implications of her work and would assert the connections between it and the political situation of all Black women. Logically developed, Black feminist criticism would owe its existence to a Black feminist movement while at the same time contributing ideas that women in the movement could use.

Black feminist criticism applied to a particular work can overturn previous assumptions about it and expose for the first time its actual dimensions. At the "Lesbians and Literature" discussion at the 1976 Modern Language Association convention Bertha Harris suggested that if in a woman writer's work a sentence refuses to do what it is supposed to do, if there are strong images of women and if there is a refusal to be linear, the result is innately lesbian literature. As usual, I wanted to see if these ideas

from ***conditions:2*** 1977

my mama and my aunt retold every story I'd ever heard.

"Remember the time Mattie Lee wouldn't let the sheriff take the furniture, screaming for the neighbors how they were trying to rob her?"

"Oh god yes, and that sheriff like to pee in his pants when he saw her throwing clothes out of the window, yelling 'take it all, take the kids why don't you? take it all!'"

"Well the point was she threw her housedress at him, and then just stood there in her underwear, and he wasn't gonna come near her after that."

"Oh no, girl, that's just what people tell. She didn't really do it. She just threatened to do it."

"It'd be a better story if she'd done it."

"It would, wouldn't it? And it would be just like her. Mattie Lee an't scared of hell or high water."

Mama looked over at me, watching them. "Give that rack a jiggle," she told me, "I don't think those jars are setting deep enough in the pot."

"Oh, Ruth leave the girl alone. Those jars are setting fine and she's doing a good job. When she grows up, she gonna know all she needs about canning and cooking and gossiping in the kitchen."

Mama laughed. "Jerrine, you're spoiling her. You should have some of your own and then you'd watch them all a little more sharply."

"Well, for not birthing any, it sure feels like I've raised a crowd. Seems like all my life I've had somebody's kids under my feet. An't nobody in this family ever been selfish with their children. Why I've woke up many a morning to find a porch full of young'uns somebody's dropped off in the night."

"Most often, Mattie Lee's."

"Oh don't go on about Mattie Lee. She's had a hard time, especially with those oldest girls. They weren't so bad when they were young but since they turned thirteen, they'd both gone as sour as bad whiskey."

"Sour and tightassed. Everybody tells me that Bobbie takes after me, but I can't see it. I'd swear that girl just an't easy in her body. She don't give a hoot about nobody or anything, except her pride."

"You know she was standing in the yard when the

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sheriff came that time, and all the yelling star[illegible] she just stood there trying to pretend wasn't nothing going on, wasn't no sheriffs beating on the door, nor nobody throwing clothes out the windows."

"What'd she do—offer them a glass of water?"

"Hell no, she tried to get Mattie Lee out of the house so she could give them the furniture quietly. It was like she didn't care what happened, just so the neighbors wouldn't know they couldn't keep up the payments."

"As if everybody didn't know it already. You can't keep secrets like that."

"Well you and I don't even try, and certainly Mattie don't. She knows who she is. But it's different for the kids, seems like they're all the time wanting just what they can't have, and they've all got such a funny dose of pride. Look at your girl there, I've seen it in her too. Not like Bobbie I'll admit, but something, something hard and angry that only shows now and again."

They looked over at me, and I tried to pretend I hadn't been listening, concentrating on waving the steam away so I could see down into the pot. Through the steam, they both looked older—two worn tired women repeating old stories to each other and trying not to worry about things they couldn't change anyway. It struck me then how young they both were to be looking so old, neither of them as old as my stepfather's sisters; mama not yet thirty, and Aunt J less than ten years older than her. Still they seemed so different from me, almost as if they came out of another century. I wished then that I could be more like them, easier in my body and not so hungry all the time.

After the vegetables, the peaches had to be done which meant it was almost two weeks before I got the hook off to myself. It had gotten rusty but that came off pretty easily with steel wool and a little grease. I worked at the metal steadily until it shone like silver.

"You're really serious, aren't you?" Grey grinned at me like I'd grown an extra set of teeth. He ran his hands over the points on the hooks. "And you surely

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did a good job of sneaking this off Aunt J." He laughed and scratched at his hands. When he'd turned fourteen, Grey had begun to grow hair on his chest and arms just like his brother, but Grey had shaved it all off with a straight razor. That, of course, made it grow back thicker which tickled Grey to death. It not only made him different from his brother—a life-long ambition—he also talked it up as being a sign of how manly he was. The only problem was that it hadn't just grown back thick but long and it itched him. It almost ruined his tough image, the fact that he was always standing around scratching at the wavy reddish-brown hair on his thumbs.

"I'm serious," I told him, pointedly not looking toward his hands. I wanted him on my side.

"Wellllll," he drawled, running his fingertips over the points again. "You've put a little too much shine on these for safety. You plan on not being seen, we better spread a little black paint where it will do the most good, tone down the light-catching side of this thing."

"You'll ruin it," I couldn't help myself. I really loved the shine of that hook.

"Hell no, won't touch the tips. I'll just make it harder to spot."

I didn't really believe him. I figured he was just trying to make himself seem more important, since it was obvious I was going to have to take the hard part of this thing. There wasn't any way my tall hairy cousin was going to fit through the roof vent of the Woolworth's store.

When it came down to it, there was a moment when I thought I wasn't going to make it. Grey had only a little trouble swinging the hook high enough to get it to bite into the water tower on the back roof, and I'd only had a little trouble getting up the rope with my feet braced against the brick wall. It was a little trickier at the top where they'd stuck broken glass on the edge—probably to discourage people with ideas like mine. But the rope hadn't frayed and I jumped the glass easily with the rope to brace me. At some time they'd covered the exhaust fan with chicken wire and a couple of wood slats. The chicken wire was rusty and pulled free pretty

fast, and I kicked at the slat that was in my way until it finally broke. It was looking through the fan blades that worried me. I could slip around them probably but the engine block was big and oily. That would be a tight piece.

"You OK?" Grey whisper-yelled.

"Fine, now shut up," I tried to keep it quiet but he seemed to hear me. The blades of the fan weren't sharp at all, just gummy and covered with dust. I thought about it for a moment and then went over and pulled the hook free; then coiled the rope up and tied it around one prong. I would push it ahead of me into the darkness. I didn't think about how it might get stuck or how the wood slat would have been safer. All I knew climbing over fan blades and wiggling around the engine block was I wanted those razor points near me. I was scared and sweaty, and half-convinced I was going to get caught but those points were sharp and certain and tangibly dangerous the way I knew inside I wanted to be.

The exhaust pipe widened on the other side of the fan and there was a kind of filter there made of sharp prickly stuff that bit my fingers. I unhooked it on one side and slid through, then hooked it again. It was so dark, I couldn't see that the pipe bent at an angle and the hook banged the sides as I felt my way. There was no warning at all when the pipe suddenly turned down and the hook slid out of my hand. I fell after it, my shoulder hitting the edge of another grate, knocking it sideways so that the hook fell ahead of me into a loud shattering noise. I caught the edge of the hole, held myself only an instant and fell after it. I bit my tongue as I fell and it was a miracle I didn't scream. I hit the side of the cabinet-rack that displayed the pattern books and registered immediately the hook points just inches from my butt.

"Oh my god," I whispered. My hip ached where I'd hit but nothing seemed broken. In the dim light from the streetlights, I could see that the hook had shattered the glass case that covered the sewing notions. It was lying with two of the points straight up just where I could so easily have fallen. "Oh my god."

I was suddenly soaking wet and weak all over. I half-fell the rest of the way off the cabinet onto the

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glass case, my sneakers cracking the rest of the glass across. I was shaking so that it was hard to climb down and when I was finally standing in the aisle, I saw that my hands were covered with fine counter glass dust that glinted like diamonds in the light from the front. I took a deep slow breath and gave a careful look around. Up near the front I thought I saw a shadow move that was probably Grey waiting for me to come let him in. But inside the store was perfectly still and musty, smelling of sweet toilet water and starched new clothes.

I pulled the hook free and started up front. Broken glass from the notions case crunched under my feet. I stopped and looked around. The candy counter had been moved further up front. I could see the double stacked case of nuts right next to the popcorn machine. I swung the hook in my hand back and forth as I walked toward it, feeling the grin on my face widen and a looseness move down my back. How long had it been since I'd been in here? How long since I'd stood in front of the candy counter and smelled the particular Woolworth's smell of dust, salt and caramel corn. I swung the hook back and forth, back and forth, letting the loose part of the rope slip in my fingers, back and forth—and right into the case. The glass shattered sideways and nuts poured out. I couldn't help myself. I just started laughing out loud. When the sound stopped I saw that the case was a sham. There hadn't been any more than two inches of nuts pressed up against the glass and propped with cardboard.

"Cheap sons of bitches," I said out loud.

I heard Grey pounding on the front door. He was so impatient to get in I was afraid he was going to break the door. Carefully I dragged the jack that was on special sale out of the window. "Stop it," I yelled at Grey when he kept beating on the glass. It wasn't easy but I got the brace fixed against one door and the lever wedged in the crack. Two turns of the crank and the door popped open with a snap. Immediately Grey streaked past me like a dog with his tail on fire. I shoved the jack back out of sight and ran back to the pattern stand to climb up and push the

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grate back into place. Let them wonder in the morning how we did it.

"Goddamn," Grey crowed and I heard more glass break. He'd cracked the front of the knife case and was happily stuffing his pockets with jackknives of all sizes. I looked past him over the store at all the *things* on display. Cheap junk everywhere: shoes that went to paper in the rain, clothes that separated at the seams, stale candy, make-up that made your skin break out—what was there here that I could use? I remembered the rows of canned vegetables at Aunt J's—rows of tomatoes and okra and green beans that stretched for shelf on shelf in her cellar. That stuff was worth something. I bit my lip and went and got my hook. What had I wanted except to be inside this place, to stand here and look at it and let some of the anger out?

Grey was running up and down the aisles, grabbing stuff and then dropping it. "Goddamn, we're a team," he told me and took a pillow case up front to fill it with cigarettes.

"Yeah," I whispered and kicked at the case in front of me. It was full of picture frames—wood, plastic and metal gilt. The big ones were the same style that my stepfather's sister, Marvella, had for her family pictures. For a moment I thought about smashing them, but those weren't Marvella's, even if they were the same cheap brand she wouldn't admit she'd bought. I swung my hook back and forth, thinking about what it was that I really wanted, who I really wanted to get to.

I ran back up to the front, calling for Grey as I went, but even so it was twenty minutes before I could get him out of there. "We an't gonna lock the door you know," I told him, "and your hands are full anyway." He had his shirt tied tight around his middle to hold stuff he couldn't carry in his hands.

"Goddamn," he kept saying like a happy child, "goddamn!"

I pulled the door to so that it looked closed from a distance and grabbed Grey's elbow. As we ran up State Street, neither of us could keep from whispering to the grey-faced men standing around.

"The goddamned Woolworth's is standing open,

NAOMI AND AVERY

Raymina Y. Mays

That was Dubrey Walker's girl across the street crying on and waking people up at all hours of the night. It was all around town that all of Dubrey's five girls were crazy and that Dubrey was mainly responsible for their craziness. Folk thought that the sixth girl would have a clear head and a good mind because by the time she was born Dubrey was old, had a bad liver from drinking too much and was demented besides. He wasn't strong enough to influence this sixth child with his bad talk and his cheap wine.

Avery was the child's name and Avery was her mother's name. Folk thought that since Dubrey'd been the one who had insisted on this name at the point of the mother's death during childbirth, something good had come over him. For his wife had been a good woman. He had beat her nearly to death two weeks before she went into labor and Dubrey swore on her deathbed that he'd take care of the child and not do to her what he did to his wife and other daughters. Of course, it was hard for folk to believe all of this because Dubrey did two things well: lie and get drunk. But they wanted to believe.

But Avery was beating on this woman's door in the middle of the night. She looked right crazed, she was so mad.

Hadn't the child come into the world with more good circumstances on her side than her sisters and wasn't she given a good name? Folk believed. Folk hoped for the child. Folk prayed. They talked up Avery's well-being from evening to morning sometimes. Her colds, her scratches, they knew about them. They knew when she was old enough to have her period and they knew when she came on it. They talked about these events into the night sometimes. And in spirit they salved her chest, bandaged her knees with their words, welcomed her into womanhood with their whispers. Folk would say to anybody that they did the best they could by Avery Walker.

But Avery was screaming at this woman who was looking down at her from the upstairs window.

Another important something led folk to believe that Avery wouldn't be like Dubrey and the others. More important than Dubrey being too old and drunk, than their watching the child, which was short of and better than getting shot for getting in Dubrey's family business, more important was the fact that Avery looked like her mother. Folk thought it was a reasonable myth. Avery looked like her mother. A walk that could have possibly been her own distinctive walk became "the way 'The Ms. Avery' walked."

Even Avery's sisters, Lena, Brey, Donna, and the twins Tess and Teresa believed Avery wouldn't turn out like them. They'd not encourage her one way or the other. They simply believed what folks said. She'd be alright and not crazy. They'd go over to the house when Avery was a little girl and one would float her on a knee and join with the other sisters in cutting up about when they were kids. If one of them had a mind to, she'd comb Avery's hair or pull down her pants to see if she had on clean panties and if not, find some for her to put on, then tell her a story about always wearing clean underwear or being clean in general in case she got hit by a car and had to go to the hospital.

When Avery thought she was old enough to tell her sisters not to come over, she did. They would come anyway and stand over her pots of greens or beans she'd leave simmering while she went to the store. Or they'd spill beer on her homework papers. Once something got over Tess and she ripped up their mother's picture while Avery was out running errands. The picture was all that Avery had and the sisters laughed. From then on Avery met her sisters at the door with Dubrey's shotgun. If they were in the house when she arrived from school, she'd come through the back door and run them out with the shotgun. After a while the sisters stopped trying to come to the house.

As Avery stood under the woman's door and named who she was hating, she called the names of

her sisters, too. Avery spoke of being tired. She said she wasn't crazy.

Avery watched the neighbors watch her. She could vaguely hear her sisters taunting her. For the neighbors, she was short on words. For her sisters, she had no words. Her mother was gone and so was the only reminder that she had. Far as Dubrey went in her memory, Avery didn't see him as a father. He was Dubrey Walker, drunk all the time and never was courteous enough to talk directly to her. He talked to the ceiling, or with his eyes closed, to himself. He worked, paid the housenote and got drunk.

Avery tried to cut out the voices and the memories, but she couldn't.

When Avery was ten or eleven, she learned how to ask for money for the bills Dubrey forgot to pay and she would take the bus to town to pay them. When Avery was fifteen or sixteen she would ask around about who she should call for repairs or she learned to do them herself. When she was eighteen, and a graduate from high school, she inherited the house. One of the few times when Dubrey was sober, he showed Avery the deed to the house, mumbled that Avery's mother wanted the house paid for, and showed Avery that the house belonged to her. Then he left the house for the bar.

Avery had not understood what owning a house meant when she got word from all five sisters at once that someone shot Dubrey while he was drinking at the bar. "Shot him dead," they said over and over, rocking and reeling drunk. Avery remembered making a connection between his death and clean underwear.

The sisters stood outside the door until Avery invited them in. Avery watched them mourn and she mourned, listening to endless stories about Dubrey. The sisters slept sprawled in different locations in the house and Avery had an ambulance take Dubrey's body from the morgue to the Robeson Funeral Home. Two days later, the sisters gathered with some of Dubrey's friends in the funeral parlor, looked at him some, talked to his body some, then drove to the cemetery and watched while he was

might be applied to the Black women writers that I know and quickly realized that many of their works were, in Harris' sense, lesbian. Not because women are "lovers," but because they are the central figures, are positively portrayed and have pivotal relationships with one another. The form and language of these works is also nothing like what white patriarchal culture requires or expects.

I was particularly struck by the way in which both of Toni Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, could be explored from this new perspective.[14] In both works the relationships between girls and women are essential, yet at the same time physical sexuality is overtly expressed only between men and women. Despite the apparent heterosexuality of the female characters I discovered in re-reading *Sula* that it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel, but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance towards the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and the family. Consciously or not, Morrison's work poses both lesbian and feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives.

Sula and Nel find each other in 1922 when each of them is twelve, on the brink of puberty and the discovery of boys. Even as awakening sexuality "clotted their dreams," each girl desires "a someone" (51) obviously female with whom to share her feelings. Morrison writes:

> ...for it was in dreams that the two girls had met. Long before Edna Finch's Mellow House opened, even before they marched through the chocolate halls of Garfield Primary School...they had already made each other's acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams. They were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone who, quite like the dreamer shared the delight of the dream. When Nel, an only child, sat on the steps of her back porch surrounded by the high silence of her mother's incredibly orderly house, feeling the neatness pointing at her back, she studied the poplars and fell easily into a picture of herself lying on a flowered bed, tangled in her own hair, waiting for some fiery prince. He approached but never quite arrived. But always, watching the dream along

buried. After this, once in a while, a sister or two would come over to the house to curse Avery about insurance money or curse her about how the house was theirs, too. They'd call her out of her name, calling her Ms. thing or Ms. bitch. They said she was like her mother: stupid and stingy.

When Avery resumed this hard knocking on the woman's door, she began to call everyone's name and she couldn't get into the woman's house. Folk decided she'd completely lost it at this point. How could the girl whose life went on, who was so cared for act like this in public? She'd practically fixed up the house by herself. Folk heard she'd been asking around about college. But what did they know? Avery was alone except for girl friends who'd come over, some staying longer than others. She kept out of sight. If Avery was mowing her lawn or trying to fix one of her storm windows, anybody in the neighborhood knew not to speak but pass on by. She had been alone like this for a year until Anneke, who was upstairs peeking out of her window, moved to the neighborhood.

Anneke had walked right over to where Avery was watering her roses and started talking to her. Folk saw it. Avery invited Anneke in the house and they left some time later talking and laughing. Soon, Avery would even cross the street to Anneke's house and wouldn't leave for days. Avery began to wait on the porch for Anneke's car to pull in the driveway. Just smiling and carrying on when Anneke walked up. Folk saw it, got suspicious and started talking when this happened because there was another woman Avery started talking to. Naomi. Something was wrong in folks' mind because Naomi was crazy. Folk saved this information and they began to recall and drum it up as they stood in Anneke's yard, watching Avery try to beat the door down. They watched Avery not coming into womanhood as predicted, talking about killing Anneke, talking about love, and bitch this and bitch that, motherfucker this and motherfucker that. She was crazy.

Naomi was standing at the edge of her own lawn watching Avery beat on Anneke's door. Anneke was screaming that she would call the police if Avery

didn't go on home. The neighbors, while they didn't like Anneke for befriending Avery, kept commenting about how they wanted to call the police too. In the minutes that they stood watching Avery and thinking about her, they wanted to hate her too, as she had failed them.

Anneke was hanging her head out of her window now screaming, "Did you suddenly become stupid, or were you born that way? Last time I'm going to mess around with a crazy, weakassed woman who shows her feelings in front of every Tom, Dick, and Harry who passes by. Go on home, Avery."

Avery's sisters being drunk and long-winded sat across the street on Avery's porch, shared a bottle of wine and laughed. One of them screamed, "Call the police on the bitch." Avery heard this. She sighed and made a sucking noise as if she was out of breath. A flashlight was shining in her face. When she turned she saw Naomi making her way through the crowd. Avery heard the words, "Come with me." Then she remembered.

One day while Avery was standing on her porch, Naomi who hadn't had more than two words to say to her ever, came to her porch and whispered, "When you need me, we gonna both know it." Avery didn't pay too much attention to this at the time because she believed Naomi to be drunk or crazy since two weeks past, her friend died in her house. But now Avery followed Naomi to the house next to hers. She could hear her sisters' laughter. When she made it to the door, she screamed, "Last time!" and followed Naomi into the house.

Naomi let Avery spit out the drunk words. She did not try to calm her. She let her become louder. She waited and she waited. When there was a lull in the one-way conversation, Naomi took Avery's hand and led her through the house, cutting on lights and moving whatnots out of the way with her free hand. Avery found a way to brush past everything anyway. When Avery came to the sofa, she sat and rested her head on a pillow. Naomi began to pace and wondered if her need to talk to Avery was greater than her desire to listen. It had been some days since

she had talked to a woman. The last one died in her house.

Folk had shifted from Anneke's lawn to Naomi's when Anneke turned the lights out. They were brewing it up, working with their dislike for Naomi and her friend Fay who died. Fool Naomi had tried to kill herself over that woman, a woman who she claimed, time and time again, was her cousin. When Fay died, Naomi ran down the street in her bathrobe. She had no shoes on. She had no phone so she had to pound on door after door. By the time the ambulance got there, Fay was gone. While the ambulance people were there, Naomi was locked in the bathroom slitting her wrists. Where it was that Fay had gone when she died, Naomi had tried to go, and since Fay's death had been crazy.

The neighbors were prepared to stay in front of Naomi's house all night. Avery's sisters had gone on home red-eyed from too much wine and as confused as ever, talking about who was at home waiting and being dependent when they had essentially been taken more times than they had been taken care of.

When Avery had calmed herself, she sat up and looked at Naomi. And for some minutes they made eye contact. Neither flinched. They both rarely blinked. Avery began to feel a swelling inside herself. There was a trembling that she couldn't control. She didn't remember tears or what they meant. She only knew that she could not control these and they reminded her of a river. She never took her eyes off Naomi. She watched Naomi's swelling and she watched her river run and wet smiles pushed through the misery of the moment. Avery muttered, "You were right." She broke the silence and the other words flowed. Avery leaned back as she had done after a day's work, when she was in the privacy of her own home or the way she had done when she was with Anneke.

"She did the same kind of lying," Avery continued. "Said there would be nobody else. Said when she saw me standing in my yard—that was it for her. Said it was me. I was the one and she said she knew it. There'd be nobody come along and

change how she felt, she said. She was always talking about forever. Big-time lying."

"Seem like folk don't take into account another woman or death. You can't believe forever. Heart attacks got nothing to do with forever," Naomi reasoned.

Avery pulled the bottom of her T-shirt to her face and wiped away the wet.

"You can't live with a woman for twenty years and expect her to leave. My mistake was not knowing. I put her clothes in a pile in the backyard along with everything she gave me. Some jewelry, some letters, a dried rose. Her herbal essence and her birth certificate. I woulda burned everything but I didn't. I got a notion to kill myself and I tried, but not before I put her things back in place."

"Listen," Avery said, "I know. I loved. I used my key to get in her house. I was gonna fix the light switch cause there was a short in it. Then I was gonna light a candle in the bathroom and run bubble bath as we did sometime. She take a day off to be with a woman I didn't know about. She said only me. Forever."

"There wasn't no warning," said Naomi.

"None whatsoever," finished Avery.

They did not sleep. They talked into the morning. They put emotions in their rightful place. And the anger and the swelling continued throughout.

The neighbors went on home, but not before someone passed the window and said Naomi and Avery had been sitting only so far from each other, as he measured the distance with his hands.

MAKAI/FIRST LIGHT*

Willyce Kim

Here where salt gathers
between shell and moss stones
where birds rise off water
like great winds in passing
where the sea tosses brilliance
of cold stars
was I born
my heart's breath, storm clouds,
surging through air,
my bones, musk and white light,
first snow in winter,
my blood, waterfall, and rituals
under desert moon,
I am a woman filled
with night visions
I walk with the wolves
and howl my own songs,
I lie in the tall grass,
I lie on the mesa,
my hair like black smoke
rises in wind
my teeth like thin razors
flash in the dawning.

*Makai is Hawaiian for "to the sea."

from ***conditions:10*** 1984

I WORK UNDERGROUND

Sy Margaret Baldwin

for the woman miner killed by a falling slab of slate
Coalport, Pennsylvania, October 1979

I work underground mining the soft coal
that powers the generating plant
over by Harrisburg I work
underground in the Rushton mine
where the walls of the
galleries swallow sound

I'm a burrower in black veins

mostly I tend to my own business
the safety director shrugs his shoulders says
this job's too tough for a woman says *anyway*
we don't want women down here
because we respect them my hands
grow hard in my gloves

I mark the leaptides of my muscles/

all night at the bottom of the
mine installing roofbolts I'm not afraid
of the blackness with its
poised slabs of slate/ the charcoal
reflects off the round mirrors of my glasses
I make a safe place for my hands

I come off shift at 8 o'clock
riding the man-trip up into
daylight I shake the coarse dust from
my coveralls I blink the sun off
my eyes like yellow sandpaper

slagheaps coalchutes a stream of steam

from ***conditions:10*** 1984

I've worked hard all my life
now I'm a miner mining
soft coal for the Harrisburg plant
I know what it means: respect/
in the daylight a cow lowers her head

winds her tongue
around the long spring grasses

from ***conditions:10*** 1984

THE SHOWER

Linda Smukler

my voice is thin I stand in the shower what's that I ask I am at the level of that what is it? a penis he says men have them I stand there watching it I don't have one girls don't have one he holds it for me touch it can I touch it? long and skin thick over something hard thicker than all my fingers it moves under them it's not a part of him does he take if off when he puts on his clothes? we are taking a shower he is holding it to show me underneath this is the scrotum he says like two eggs what's all that raised over them? touch it veins he *says hairy he is very black hairy there I am pink it* feels like a lie what does it do? it's something men do my face is no taller I am pink and he is hairy black hair against the wall are knobs to make the water go hot and cold my back is against them he tells me not to be scared and runs his fingers through my hair curly head he says it's just the difference between boys and girls he is not a boy he is my father boys are on t.v. a boy is a friend of Lassie and rescues things boys are me smooth like me he is still showing me the shower walls are there knobs like a gate I can't go through I have to stand in the middle I have to see him the water protects me falling between us like rain falls make it hotter I tell him scared makes me cold time to wash he says no I say first I'll wash you then you can wash me he says no I don't want to wash I want to sit down in the water the hot makes my heart beat too fast he has the wash cloth he is washing me anyway soaping my back the thing hangs down on me as he bends over to scrub it's sticking up brushing back and forth along my shoulder I pull away I'm almost done he says stand still and let me wash your legs I have to pee his legs are hairy too I've seen them before what's wrong? he tickles me in the ribs with the wash cloth it is rough and orange more will come if I pull away my serious little girl what's wrong? he tickles more I am laughing no I try to

from ***Conditions:11/12*** 1985

pull away be careful or you'll slip he holds me and tickles me all over I can't get past the water or the walls he drops the soap my feet lift off the ground he holds me by the shoulder I laugh and cry he can't tell if I am laughing or crying I am going to pee he pokes me in the stomach he is laughing that penis thing shaking as he laughs had enough? now let me wash you I can't hold it I am peeing I bend down to get the soap to hide that I am peeing he doesn't notice the water runs too hard I hand him the soap I am done peeing he washes up my legs feet first up into my crotch washing me because I am dirty washing the pee away he washes me a long time moving the washcloth and soap back and forth I stand on my own staring at the dark tiles at the water beading and falling by its own weight far away I hear him whistling he echoes in the walls OK you're done he says it's my turn I tell him to turn the water hotter I'm getting cold it's not cold he says yes it is he turns the water hotter to please me he hands me the wash cloth and points to his stomach here first he says I wash his stomach reaching out and above the thing below good he says and pulls me to him my arms around him the thing is in my face my neck he tells me to wash his back he holds me there I am choking I can barely move my arms you have to wash harder than that to get me clean I try to wash harder his legs are shaking his knees around my own I am choking I try to say I'm done he calls down to me what? not letting go I drop the washcloth and grab his hips and push away the thing springs out after me it's following me I turn away and try to open the door handle I can't reach it I look at him I'm done I say again you're done? but I'm not half as clean as you he says I have to go I'm cold he stares at me and says I guess your daddy is just going to have to get clean himself there's a towel for you outside on the rack be careful and don't slip he opens the shower door for me and closes it when I'm out outside I am surprised the rest of the bathroom is still there it is white and steamy the mirror is covered with fog I pretend I am hidden in the steam I pull the towel to me and hold it to my belly it is tired from the pee

from ***Conditions:11/12*** 1985

being forced out of me I hear my daddy singing and
look through the glass door of the shower to see his
shadow washing himself he sounds happy he stops
singing I can see the pink outline of his hands not
hairy now washing the thing penis he washes and
is silent it must take a long time to get clean then I
hear his breath and suddenly he shouts like he has
hurt himself his breath is fast like he is getting mad
he will come after me I made him turn it up I throw
the towel up over my head and run out of the room
the water got too hot I made him turn it up

from *Conditions:11/12* 1985

with her, were some smiling sympathetic eyes. Someone as interested as she herself in the flow of her imagined hair, the thickness of the mattress of flowers, the voile sleeves that closed below her elbows in gold-threaded cuffs.

Similarly, Sula, also an only child, but wedged into a household of throbbing disorder constantly awry with things, people, voices and the slamming of doors, spent hours in the attic behind a roll of linoleum galloping through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses in full view of someone who shared both the taste and the speed.

So when they met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (51–52)

As this beautiful passage shows, their relationship, from the very beginning, is suffused with an erotic romanticism. The dreams in which they are initially drawn to each other are actually complementary aspects of the same sensuous fairytale. Nel imagines a "fiery prince" who never quite arrives while Sula gallops like a prince "on a gray-and-white horse."[15] The "real world" of patriarchy requires, however, that they channel this energy away from each other to the opposite sex. Lorraine Bethel explains this dynamic in her essay "Conversations with Ourselves: Black Female Relationships in Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*." She writes:

> I am not suggesting that Sula and Nel are being consciously sexual, or that their relationship has an overt lesbian nature. I am suggesting, however, that there is a certain sensuality in their interactions that is reinforced by the mirror-like nature of their relationship. Sexual exploration and coming of age is a natural part of adolescence. Sula and Nel discover men together, and though their flirtations with males are an important part of their sexual exploration, the sensuality that they experience in each other's company is equally important.[16]

WAR DOG

Joy Harjo

You came looking for me on the hottest nights.
Effie's Bar near the interchange, or the Powwow
Club farther north. Watched for cops who patrolled
the area heavily, I mean, you were not white. While
the husband I stole you from roamed back the other way,
looked for skinny blond girls to keep him hungry.

I took you to the club, and you were always ready.
Your knife wrapped in leather on your hip; you knew
it wasn't cool to be Cheyenne in America, let alone
a southwestern city where even your name was open
to question.

I say you earned it. Even now, five years later
and I understand the rules much better, but still
don't follow them. And know you wouldn't believe them
if you had lived to tell their truths back.

War Dog. It wasn't just the whites either. Your
husband hated you for being a contradiction, laughed
at you for your nasty tongue, so fluent, it killed him.
He blamed Oklahoma and the white blood, but you knew
it was nothing, could even smile in a language
foreign to your own.

Knew how to lose it all, in another language.

I always wondered why you left when you did, took
your son and escaped to another edge of sundown.
I forever loved you but knew there wasn't a season
here you could believe in.

Hey War Dog. I don't forget. This fall there are
green chilies roasting, and chickens are fat and greasy
in the yard you left behind. Tell your son the air
is changing and we are not the only crazy ones.

from ***conditions:11/12*** 1985

And know that I look for you, long nights like this
when the moon draws a yellow knife in danger. Know we
are all lucky, and that you could return to it all
as easily as you left.

THE WEEPING BRIDE

Jessica Hagedorn

from Dogeaters *a novel-in-progress*

There it is, the centerpiece on the presidential table: a twelve-tiered, gold and white cake trimmed with silver sugar doves. No...it's a twelve-tiered, white and silver cake with white sugar doves and gold filling, created especially for the occasion by the Alacran family dentist, Dr. Benita Zamora. Her nephew is a poet of the underground, and *she is not at the wedding*. The perennially smiling dentist has been detained by four unsmiling members of the Special Squadron while on the way to her car after baking the magnificent cake. The car, a modest gun-metal blue Toyota Corona, is still locked and parked in front of the Dental Center's steel and glass entrance. A half-eaten ham sandwich lies rotting on the back seat, wrapped in wax paper. Everything's left undisturbed. There seem to be no witnesses to the sudden event. *Dr. Benita Zamora is simply not at the wedding*. According to the Manila Times Daily, she has been placed under house arrest for insubordination and inciting to riot; or rather, she was placed under *office arrest*. The popular, affluent dentist, *dentist to the stars*, has chosen to spend the rest of her days within the confines of her professional environment. "It doesn't matter, anyway. I only go home to sleep...I'd rather die in my office," the unmarried dentist reveals under torture.

No. It's actually a twelve-tiered hallucination, a golden pound cake with white vanilla and rum icing, white marzipan doves with silver eyes, sculpted white chocolate bows attached to silver filigree butterflies imported from Spain; no, actually the filigree butterflies were constructed by sixteen blind nuns from the Convent of Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow. The filigree butterflies are a wedding gift from the First Lady, filigree butterflies suspended by invisible wires, flying out of the bottom tier of the phenomenal cake.

The dentist is dead. The dentist never existed. The unforgettable wedding cake has actually been designed and baked from scratch by the bride's glamorous mother, Isabel Alacran. "I never knew she could cook!" the First Lady exclaims, visibly impressed by the intricacies of the edible construction. "My wife was trained to be an architect," Severo Alacran whispers confidentially, lying to the First Lady and the President. The beaming President grunts with admiration. He hardly moves at all, swollen and rooted to his chair. He and his wife are guests of honor at the wedding.

Holding hands under an arch of violet, spun sugar flowers, the customary bride and groom figurines stand poised on the top tier of the cake. The First Lady groans. She is served the first slice, and takes a healthy bite. The President shakes his head and points to his potbelly, refusing the cake. The First Lady signals for more. A waiter with Elvis Presley hair rushes to serve her.

Senator Avila once said: "Food is what's important. The center of our celebrations and our sorrows.... You can't describe a real Filipino without listing food, music, dancing, and love...most probably in that order. Food is the pleasure that doesn't talk back."

So the Senator once said, so even his enemy the General agrees. So the weeping bride dreams the night before the Senator's assassination: buttery cakes melt in her mouth, tomatoes and onions are stuffed in the slit bellies of grilled fish, she bastes the roasting brown flesh of pigs with honey, and smothers the lacquered pigs with banana leaves, wearing her floor-length white veil crowned with a wreath of garlic. "I INSIST!" her glamorous mother insists, hanging a necklace of garlic bulbs around her daughter's neck for extra protection. "You can't be too careful nowadays," the sinister groom grins, flashing his canine teeth.

It's the pungent vinegar perfume of pork and chicken adobo the weeping bride smells, the pungent vinegar perfume a man rubs against his skin before pressing a woman closer to him.... Taxi dancer, blondie, whore, a man's home away from home. "What's the matter, blondie? Can't stand my cologne?" the

President laughs, rubbing more garlic and vinegar behind his ears. His bodyguards laugh with him. He's definitely one with a taste for blondes; although he likes them all, actually. Dark or fair, fat or thin. Nubile, or matronly. His personal physician's put him on a strict diet, and it's all for his own good. No pork, no cake, no women. He wards off death. It's all just a memory to him now, some image he pulls out of the night while he strokes himself down there, all dry and crusty between the legs.

The weeping bride recalls her father. She wonders when he too, will die.

Senator Domingo Avila has been shot dead.

Mourned by his stoic widow Luisa, his missing daughter the beauty queen Daisy, his bewildered teenage daughter, Aurora; now mourned by his resentful brother Oscar, Oscar's wife Delia and only legitimate daughter, the artist Clarita; now mourned by the weeping bride, Rosario "Baby" Alacran. She has just married Oswaldo "Pepe" Carreon. She does not know why she marries, or mourns.

She is not a political person. She is not someone who knew the Senator well. She is not someone who knows anyone well. Baby recalls his kindness to her once; no, maybe three times in her brief past, when she was a solitary child. Some generous gesture on the Senator's part, even she finds hard to remember—but it was there, just the same. It's the essence she holds on to, as she mourns his violent death at the hands of unknown gunmen, in spite of herself.

In spite of herself, she has longed to invite him to her spectacular wedding, and made the mistake of mentioning it. She was ridiculed, as usual. She was dismissed. The weeping bride knew better, of course. It *was* impossible. It *was* silly. She had no control over the situation. Even with an invitation, the Senator wouldn't have shown up.

The wedding banquet never stops. A nauseating feast for the eyes, as well as the body and soul. Oxtails stewed for hours in peanut sauce, ethereal egg custards set in pools of burnt sugar syrup, silver tureens filled to the brim with belly and steaming hot

from ***conditions:13*** 1986

black *dinuguan*.... It's the black blood of a pig she pours on her head, the black pig's blood stew she bathes in to mourn the death of a man....

"Imagine," she once confessed to her cousin Girlie, "I've been eating and enjoying *dinuguan* for years, never even considering.... *Dugo is dugo, dugo* means blood! My god, it's the black blood of a pig, and it's terrible and delicious! My mother laughed when I told her. Now I can't eat it anymore. Just the thought of it makes me sick...."

"You're really weird, making a big deal over nothing," Girlie Alacran said to her younger cousin, with no comprehension but some sympathy.

Senator Avila has been shot dead, by unknown assailants. The weeping bride has been in bed for the past week, with a mysterious illness: aching bones, lack of appetite, occasional chills, and frequent nightmares. *Maybe it's the flu,* she tells her mother on the telephone. The weeping bride apologizes for being ill, as she apologizes for most things in her life. Her mother says nothing in return. She is more annoyed than concerned with her only child's frail health. Her daughter immediately senses this, and gets off the phone.

She has not said anything to her mother about her skin. The tiny, itchy, watery blisters that have suddenly appeared on her fingers, after so many years. She tries not to think about it, and applies more ointment from a secret tube she keeps under her pillow. Her furtiveness is unwarranted. Her husband is never home. Her husband makes flimsy excuses, blames it all on his job. Somehow, she thinks he may be telling the truth. *His job,* he has told her proudly, *is his whole life.* She never forgets anything anyone says. Her brain is a file cabinet, stuffed with snatches of conversations and memories.

She remembers her servants. How quietly they enter and exit, bringing her hot kalamansi juice, camomile tea, aspirin, icebags for her headaches, hot water bottles for her sore muscles. They take turns massaging her, saying very little. The whole house to herself, ghostly servants on tiptoe, at her beck and call. She imagines they must mourn the

dead Senator, and wonders if he is their hero. She is ashamed of feeling connected to them, and somehow feels unworthy. She tries, once again, to think of something else.

Her husband has been gone for two days, this time. She isn't sure, but she suspects something ominous about this new husband of hers who works with the General. She picks up her remote control, turns the color television on. Two o'clock in the afternoon, time for her favorite talent show. Lopito's jovial face appears on the 19-inch screen, to the comforting sound of laughter and applause. If her mother knew she was addicted to this show, she'd make another one of her cruel, snide comments. Endless talent shows and soap operas are something the weeping bride has learned to watch and enjoy in secret. A furtive, innocent life—how she spends all her afternoons.

Someone starts to sing. A quavering, female voice. *Soprano.* The weeping bride is unable to concentrate and finds her familiar images painfully depressing: anxious singers and clumsy dancers, earnest elocutionists, lewd comedians, and even the aging, jocular Lopito.... It's all so sad and vulgar, just as her mother always said. She is suddenly afraid, for no apparent reason. *She does not want this baby.* She wonders if it is too late to see a doctor. She fantasizes phoning her worldly cousin Girlie. Surely, Girlie knew a competent abortionist. If not in Manila, maybe Tokyo or Hongkong. Money was certainly no object. The weeping bride chokes on her tears, turning off her noisy television.

Laying back against the sweat-drenched pillows, she closes her eyes. The weeping bride invents a cleansing ritual for herself. She makes it up as she goes along, this movie starring herself, this movie that goes on and on, this movie that is the only sure way she knows to put herself to sleep....

Senator Domingo Avila has been assassinated.

It's the black blood of a pig the weeping bride pours on her head, the black blood stew of pale pink pig entrails she bathes in, mourning the death of a man she never knew.

from ***conditions:13*** 1986

COMMITTED SEX
Cheryl Clarke

bump the supreme court and edwin meese
i'll read anything, do anything to be sexually aroused
i'll be a lesbian, queer, whore, a sleaze
and it won't be a peep show i aint caroused.

i'll steal a vcr, make my own videos to be sexually aroused
to get my mind off star wars and other wars
and it won't be a massage parlor i aint caroused
to dance with my own kind, to flash my ass to the stars

to get my mind off the cia, contras, and other wars
in beirut, belfast, sharpeville, philly
to sleep with my own kind naked under the stars
to pose in a harness, to kiss her pussy

in tegucigalpa, la paz, luanda, miami
we gon bend down and tickle our asses
and straddle her face and lick her pussy
we'll fight like wolverines for our asses

we gon bend over stick our fingers in our asses
no closets, quarantines, kitchens, calvin kleins
we'll fight like gorillas for our asses
like a vietcong, a sandinista. for all time

no camps, bantustans, monogamy, calvin kleins
like a rebel slave or rebel comanche
like swapo, the plo, the anc for all time
we'll watch any scene, play any part we fancy

like a wild maroon, like a two-faced-ed mammy
down with supreme courts and edwin meeses
we'll fuck, suck any genital we fancy
we'll be lesbians, queers, whores, sleazes.

WHERE WILL YOU BE?

Pat Parker

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

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

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

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

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

They will not come
a mob rolling
through the streets
but quickly and quietly
move into our homes
and remove the evil,
the queerness,
the faggotry,
the perverseness
from their midst.
They will not come
clothed in brown,
and swastikas, or

from ***conditions:5*** 1979

bearing chest heavy with
gleaming crosses.
The time and need
for ruses are over.
They will come
in business suits
to buy your homes
and bring bodies to
fill your jobs.
They will come in robes
to rehabilitate
and white coats
to subjugate
and where will you be
when they come?

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

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

Everytime we watched
a queer hassled in the
streets and said nothing—
It was an act of perversion.

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

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

from ***conditions:5*** 1979

Sula and Nel must also struggle with the constrictions of racism upon their lives. The knowledge that "they were neither white nor male" is the inherent explanation of their need for each other. Morrison depicts in literature the necessary bonding that has always taken place between Black women for the sake of barest survival. Together the two girls can find the courage to create themselves.

Their relationship is severed only when Nel marries Jude, an unexceptional young man who thinks of her as "the hem—the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges" (83). Sula's inventive wildness cannot overcome social pressure or the influence of Nel's parents who "had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had" (83). Nel falls prey to convention while Sula escapes it. Yet at the wedding which ends the first phase of their relationship Nel's final action is to look past her husband towards Sula:

> ...a slim figure in blue, gliding, with just a hint of a strut, down the path toward the road.... Even from the rear Nel could tell that it was Sula and that she was smiling; that something deep down in that litheness was amused. (85)

When Sula returns ten years later, her rebelliousness fullblown, a major source of the town's suspicions stems from the fact that although she is almost thirty, she is still unmarried. Sula's grandmother, Eva, does not hesitate to bring up the matter as soon as she arrives. She asks:

> "When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you.... Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man."(92)

Sula replies: "'I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself'"(92). Self-definition is a dangerous activity for any woman to engage in, especially a Black one, and it expectedly earns Sula pariah status in Medallion.

Morrison clearly points out that it is the fact that Sula has not been tamed or broken by the exigencies of heterosexual family life which most galls the others. She writes:

> Among the weighty evidence piling up was the fact that

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

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

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

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

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

And they will come.
They will come for
the perverts

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

from ***conditions:5*** 1979

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

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

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

from conditions 5 1979

evident and like the old folks say, that girl can really go! The trick is to move in language without effort and the old folks could do that as haints and all manner of fierce thangs kept us chil'rens up and afraid all night. Youngblood does not always manage a smooth telling but when she does, look out!

There are inherent lessons a listener has to observe. And because we are children again listenin' with wide-eyed wonder Youngblood throws in nice touches. Like never hurry a story teller. In "Snuff Dippers," this lesson is well illustrated and illuminates her deft hand at storytelling. Listen in.

> "What happened Big Mama?" I asked impatiently as children do.
>
> "Hold on, chile. I'm getting to it. A story ain't something you just read off like ingredients on a soap box. A story's like a map—you follow the lines and they'll take you somewhere. There's a way to do anything, and with a story you take your time." She shook a finger in my direction. (p.23)

Each woman's story, sad or funny—like "Miss Rosa's Monkey"—calls to mind an array of people I knew in my ole neighborhood. Each enters the spotlight—a solo character alive and remembered as Youngblood's tales remind me of my own. Flashes of people I grew up knowing and knowing about parade before my eyes. Like people, some solos you remember better than others. But as the final note is spent, "They Tell Me...Now I Know" ends the collection of tales very well. They end with, as one might expect, the storyteller getting her "monthly" and that event in any young girls's life signals a new beginning. This story is a fit ending, a piece worthy to be placed at the end of this ritual procession of stories.

Storytellers in the best tradition tell stories that entertain but also instruct. Youngblood, sitting, as it were, around the kitchen table becomes for us a "Big Mama" as she, not always subtly, instructs. African and Western themes blend as "Spit in the Governor's Tea" becomes a resistance piece.

After the ancestors have been offended on Christmas day they get revenge as only they can. In the capable hands of Miss Stine this tale unfolds as the

in the blue box with gold lettering? In "Maggie Agatha Christmas St. Clair" there is a call to:

> ...hold on to your money, the flim-flam man going round.... I heard Henry got beat out of more than one hundred dollars down there by Kin Folks Corner.... I have seen the film-flammmers with my own natural eyes...playing three-card molly...on the back of the bus. (p.79–82)

For those readers who know little about the Southern Black community this work contains valuable instruction in how a people survived and remained empowered through use of language and absolute belief that "every thang gon' be all right."

Youngblood's Black community was not divided, as some writers would like us to believe. Women and men worked together and women like Miss Tom and Miss Lily were not cut out of the community because they were "Funny Women." She even includes a piece with a male "Big Mama." In "Uncle Buck Loves Jesus, Sometime" we learn more lessons about survival.

> "Don't nothing last long but death. Don't get attached to nobody and nothing you bound to lose or grieve over. God is sure to disappoint you."(p.93)

Now that I've put away my Raggedy Ann clothes washed the red circles from my cheeks and dropped my bubble gum while ballooning back from Oz I want to say some other stuff about this book.

Next time I expect to hear from a matured Shay Youngblood, writing in an adult voice, creating characters who are multi-dimensional and not tied to stereotypic situations and roles. Sometimes, when my adult self emerged, internalized stereotypes informed the text and disturbed me. Is there a Big Mama that ain't all good? Or some white folks who are not Irish and foreign who might have some heart? Or serious disharmony as there is in all communities? As African-American writers, do we still need to construct our characters in protective stereotypes to guard against "The Man?"

What I really want is for Youngblood to take all that good stuff in The Big Mama Stories, and be more mindful of her part in creating and sustaining

images of African-Americans as a people who are as diverse as any other people.

New Black talent is always welcome and I hear ya. But next time around we gon' expect mor', ya hear?

Cherry Muhanji, b. 1939, Detroit, is part of the trio that penned Tight Spaces, (Spinsters/Aunt Lute, Box 410687, San Francisco, CA 94141, 1987, $8.95 + $1.50 postage), which won an American Book Award in 1987. Cherry says, "all things being equal and the creek don't rise, my next flight which is solo will be called Her."

Collective Notes

Cheryl Clarke has been a member of the ***conditions*** collective since 1981. She is the author of two books of poetry: *Narratives: Poems in the Tradition of Black Women* and *Living as a Lesbian.* Her third volume of poetry, *Humid Pitch*, will be published on October 15th by Firebrand Books.

Melinda Goodman is a lesbian poet. She teaches at Hunter College and has recently published a collection of her poems entitled *Middle Sister.*

Paula Martinac is a fiction writer. Her short stories are featured in *Voyages Out #1* (Seal Press, 1989). She is also the editor of *The One You Call Sister: New Women's Fiction* (Cleis Press, 1989) and the coordinator of a lesbian and gay reading series in New York.

Pam A. Parker: serving as interface to the world of computer support for ***conditions*** is being hooked into two good worlds at once. A good place.

Dorothy Randall Gray: A renewed spirit has taken hold of me, pressing me to its bosom. I feel blessed with the power of words and the strength of women that write them. I am answerable only to my ancestors who read over my shoulders, making certain that I write it as I see it. That is my mandate. That is my life.

Mariana Romo-Carmona, Chilean lesbian writer, also member of Las "Buenas Amigas," a growing Latina lesbian group in the New York area.

Sabrina: Born 1958, the West Indies.

Submissions

Submissions are currently being accepted for the upcoming edition of ***conditions:seventeen***. For this issue we are especially interested in work of an erotic nature. The collective welcomes writing by women from all over the world who feel that a commitment to women is an integral part of their lives. We are interested in manuscripts of poetry, fiction, drama, novel and correspondence excerpts, interviews, journal entries, translations, book reviews, and analytical essays. The issues of race, class, age, and women's/lesbian movements, relationships, and institutions are always of particular concern. We also accept photographs and other visuals for inclusion in our publication. ***conditions*** magazine is especially committed to publicizing and reviewing women's press publications, and welcomes review copies.

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> Sula did not look her age. She was near thirty and, unlike them, had lost no teeth, suffered no bruises, developed no ring of fat at the waist or pocket at the back of her neck.(115)

In other words she is not a domestic serf, a woman run down by obligatory childbearing or a victim of battering. Sula also sleeps with the husbands of the town once and then discards them, needing them even less than her own mother did, for sexual gratification and affection. The town reacts to her disavowal of patriarchal values by becoming fanatically serious about their own family obligations, as if in this way they might counteract Sula's radical criticism of their lives.

Sula's presence in her community functions much like the presence of lesbians everywhere to expose the contradictions of supposedly "normal" life. The opening paragraph of the essay "Woman Identified Woman" has amazing relevance as an explanation of Sula's position and character in the novel. It asks:

> What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society—perhaps then, but certainly later—cares to allow her. These needs and actions, over a period of years, bring her into painful conflict with people, situations, the accepted ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, until she is in a state of continual war with everything around her, and usually with her self. She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as personal necessity, but on some level she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society—the female role.[17]

The limitations of the *Black* female role are even greater in a racist and sexist society as is the amount of courage it takes to challenge them. It is no wonder that the townspeople see Sula's independence as imminently dangerous.

Morrison is also careful to show the reader that despite their years of separation and their opposing paths, Nel and Sula's relationship retains its primacy for each of them. Nel feels transformed when Sula returns and thinks:

> It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract

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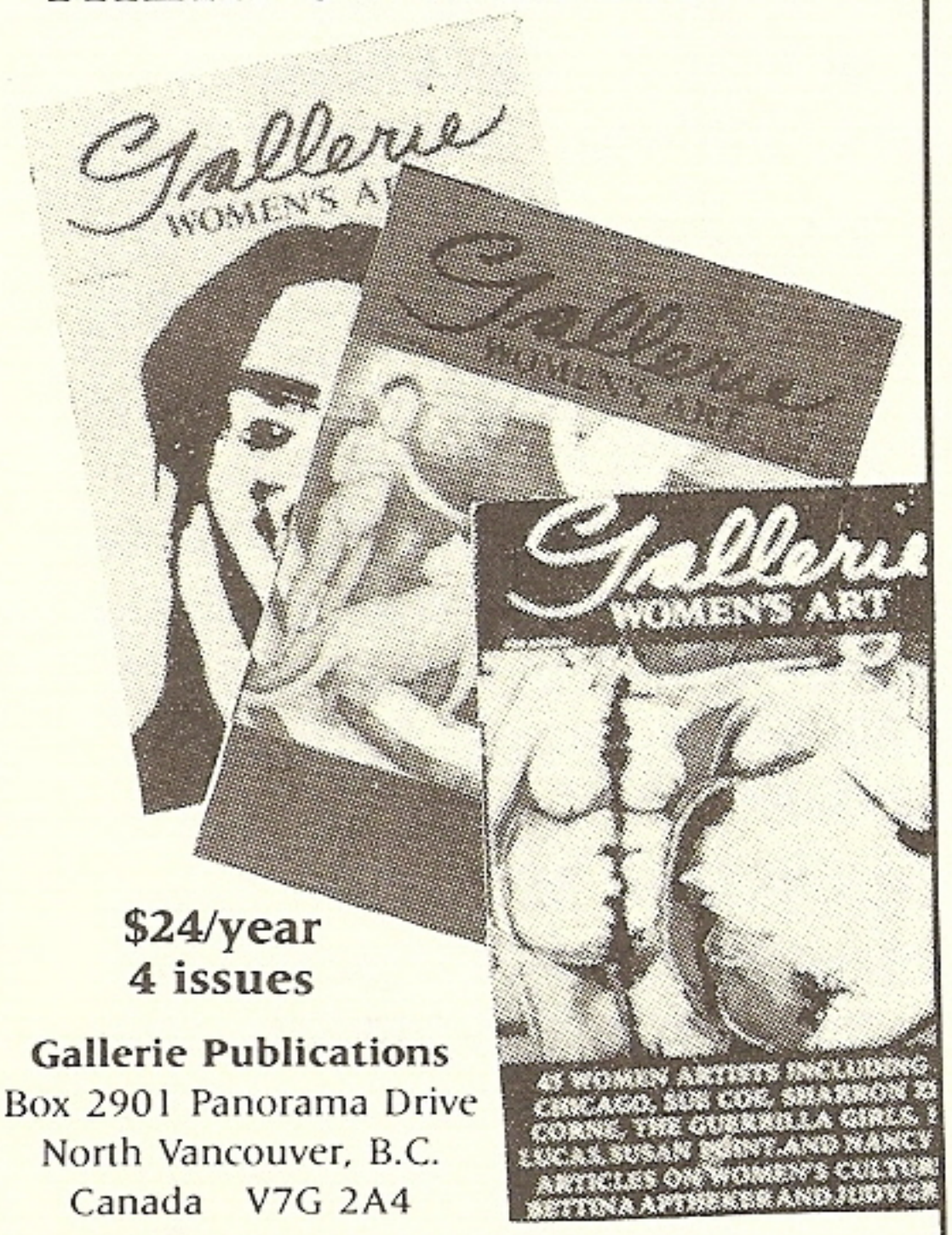

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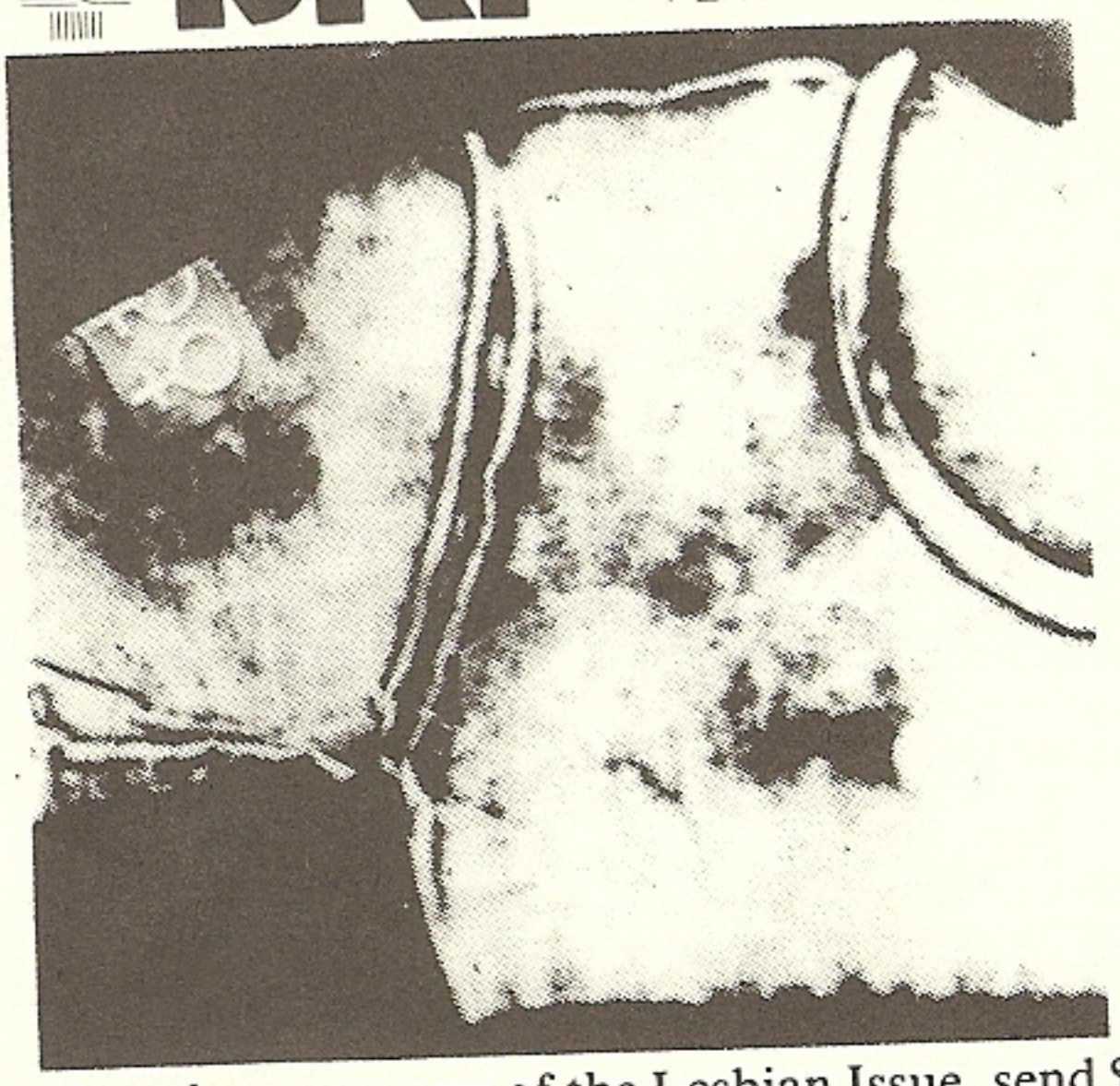

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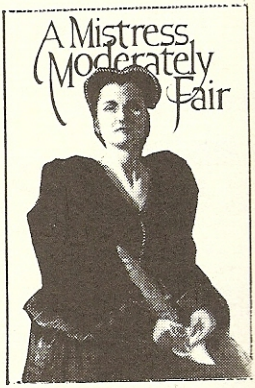

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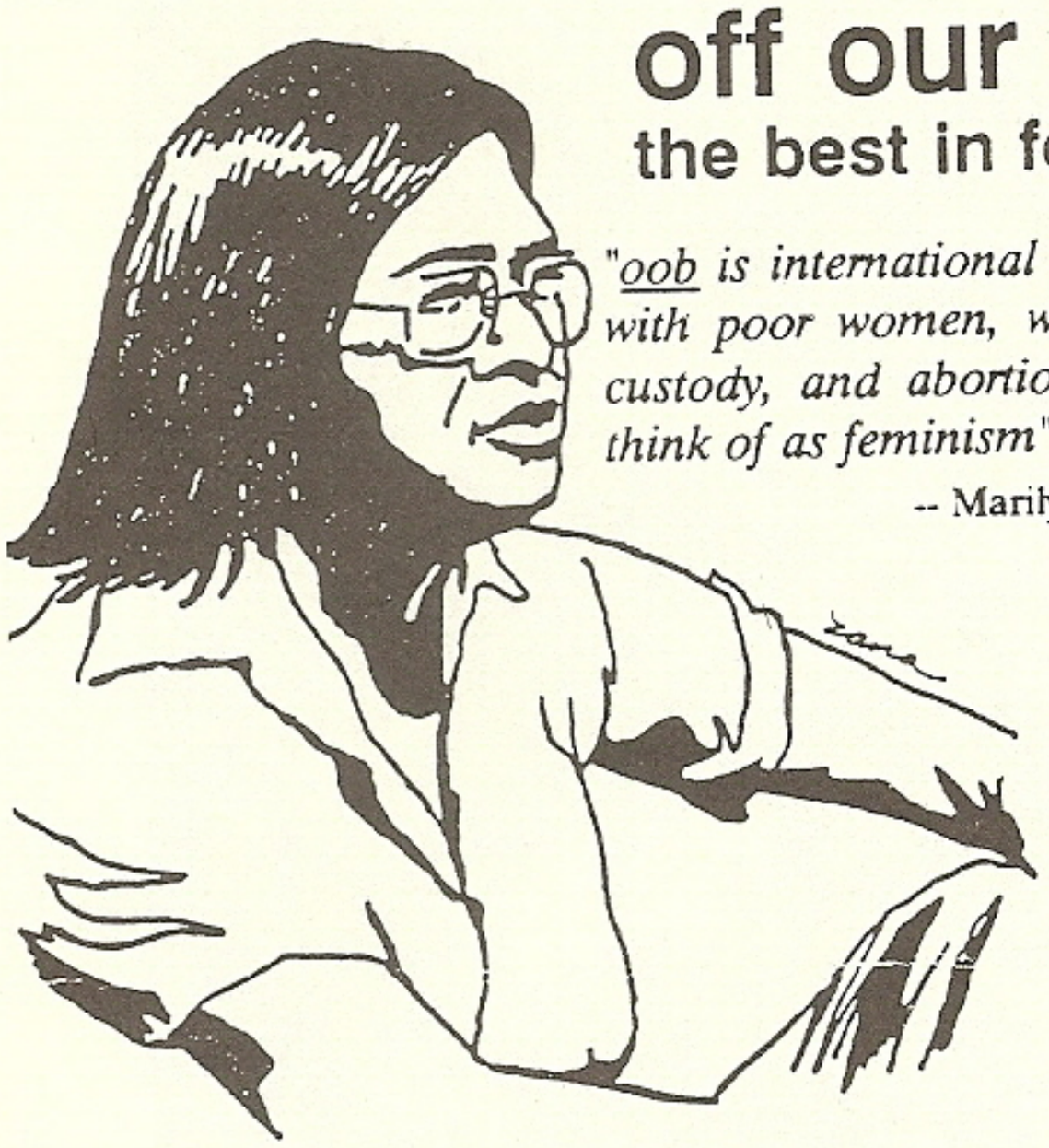

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> removed. Her old friend had come home. Sula. Who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle and a little raunchy.(95)

Laughing together in the familiar "rib-scraping" way, Nel feels "new, soft and new" (98). Morrison uses here the visual imagery which symbolizes the women's closeness throughout the novel.

Sula fractures this closeness, however, by sleeping with Nel's husband, an act of little import according to her system of values. Nel, of course, cannot understand. Sula thinks ruefully:

> Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her. Now she wanted everything, and all because of *that*. Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits. Now Nel was one of *them*. (119–120)

Sula also thinks at the realization of losing Nel about how unsatisfactory her relationships with men have been and admits:

> She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman. (121)

The nearest Sula comes to actually loving a man is in a brief affair with Ajax and what she values most about him is the intellectual companionship he provides, the brilliance he "allows" her to show.

Sula's feelings about sex with men are also consistent with a lesbian interpretation of the novel. Morrison writes:

> She went to bed with men as frequently as she could. It was the only place where she could find what she was looking for: *misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow*.... During the lovemaking she found and needed to find the cutting edge. When she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act, particles of strength gathered in her like steel shavings drawn to a spacious magnetic center, forming a tight cluster that nothing, it seemed, could break. *And there was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power*.... When her partner disengaged himself, she looked up at him in wonder trying to recall his name...waiting impatiently for him to turn away...*leaving her*

from THE MONKEY HOUSE AND OTHER CAGES

Irena Klepfisz

(The voice is that of a female monkey born and raised in a zoo.)

1
to state each horror
would be redundant. the objects
themselves suffice: a broken comb
an umbrella handle a piece of blue
plastic chipped pocket mirror.

the face is unfriendly.
i try to outstare it but
it persists moving

spastically the eyes
twitching open shut
nose quivering wrinkled fingers
picking at the ears. i do not know

this stranger.

2
i have heard of tortures
yet remain
strangely safe.
but at night
i am torn by my own
dreams see myself live
the grossest indignities probes

and unable to rip myself from my flesh
i remain silent not
uttering sound nor moan not
bothering to feel pain.

waking in early light
alone untouched
i cry over my safety.

> *to the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined in matchless harmony.* (122–123) [Italics mine.]

Sula uses men for sex which results not in communion with them, but in her further delving into self.

Ultimately the deepest communion and communication in the novel occurs between two women who love each other. After their last painful meeting, which does not bring reconciliation, Sula thinks as Nel leaves her:

> "So she will walk on down that road, her back so straight in that old green coat...thinking how much I have cost her and never remember the days when we were two throats and one eye and we had no price." (147)

It is difficult to imagine a more evocative metaphor for what women can be to each other, the "priceless-ness" they achieve in refusing to sell themselves for male approval, the total worth that they can only find in each other's eyes.

Decades later the novel concludes with Nel's final comprehension of the source of the grief that has plagued her from the time her husband walked out. Morrison writes:

> "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl."
>
> It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)

Again Morrison exquisitely conveys what women, Black women, mean to each other. This final passage verifies the depth of Sula and Nel's relationship and its centrality to an accurate interpretation of the work.

Sula is an exceedingly lesbian novel in the emotions expressed, in the definition of female character and in the way that the politics of heterosexuality are portrayed. The very meaning of lesbianism is being expanded in literature, just as it is being redefined through politics. The confusion that many readers have felt about *Sula* may well have a lesbian explanation. If one sees Sula's inexplicable "evil" and non-conformity as the evil of not being male-

identified, many elements in the novel become clear. The work might be clearer still if Morrison had approached her subject with the consciousness that a lesbian relationship was at least a possibility for her characters. Obviously Morrison did not *intend* the reader to perceive Sula and Nel's relationship as inherently lesbian. However, this lack of intention only shows the way in which heterosexist assumptions can veil what may logically be expected to occur in a work. What I have tried to do here is not to prove that Morrison wrote something that she did not, but to point out how a Black feminist critical perspective at least allows consideration of this level of the novel's meaning.

In her interview in *Conditions: One* Adrienne Rich talks about unconsummated relationships and the need to re-evaluate the meaning of intense yet supposedly non-erotic connections between women. She asserts:

> We need a lot more documentation about what actually happened; I think we can also imagine it, because we know it happened—we know it out of our own lives.[18]

Black women are still in the position of having to "imagine," discover and verify Black lesbian literature because so little has been written from an avowedly lesbian perspective. The near non-existence of Black lesbian literature which other Black lesbians and I so deeply feel has everything to do with the politics of our lives, the total suppression of identity that all Black women, lesbian or not, must face. This literary silence is again intensified by the unavailability of an autonomous Black feminist movement through which we could fight our oppression and also begin to name ourselves.

In a speech, "The Autonomy of Black Lesbian Women," Wilmette Brown comments upon the connection between our political reality and the literature we must invent:

> Because the isolation of Black lesbian women, given that we are superfreaks, given that our lesbianism defies both the sexual identity that capital gives us and the racial identity that capital gives us, the isolation of Black lesbian women from heterosexual Black women is very profound. Very profound.

> I have searched throughout Black history, Black literature, whatever, looking for some women that I could see were somehow lesbian.Now I know that in a certain sense they were all lesbian. But that was a very painful search.[19]

Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining "straightness" is our last resort. Being out, particularly out in print, is the final renunciation of any claim to the crumbs of "tolerance" that non-threatening "ladylike" Black women are sometimes fed. I am convinced that it is our lack of privilege and power in every other sphere that allows so few Black women to make the leap that many white women, particularly writers, have been able to make in this decade, not merely because they are white or have economic leverage, but because they have had the strength and support of a movement behind them.

As Black lesbians we must be out not only in white society, but in the Black community as well, which is at least as homophobic. That the sanctions against Black lesbians are extremely high is well illustrated in this comment by Black male writer Ishmael Reed. Speaking about the inroads that whites make into Black culture, he asserts:

> In Manhattan you find people actively trying to impede intellectual debate among Afro-Americans. The powerful "liberal/radical/existentialist" influences of the Manhattan literary and drama establishment speak through tokens, like for example that ancient notion of the *one* black ideologue (who's usually a Communist), the *one* black poetess (who's usually a feminist lesbian).[20]

To Reed, "feminist" and "lesbian" are the most pejorative terms he can hurl at a Black woman and totally invalidate anything she might say, regardless of her actual politics or sexual identity. Such accusations are quite effective for keeping Black women writers who are writing with integrity and strength from any conceivable perspective in line, but especially ones who are actually feminist and lesbian. Unfortunately Reed's reactionary attitude is all too typical. A community which has not confronted sexism, because a widespread Black feminist move-

ment has not required it to, has likewise not been challenged to examine its heterosexism. Even at this moment I am not convinced that one can write explicitly as a Black lesbian and live to tell about it.

Yet there are a handful of Black women who have risked everything for truth. Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, and Ann Allen Shockley have at least broken ground in the vast wilderness of works that do not exist.[21] Black feminist criticism will again have an essential role not only in creating a climate in which Black lesbian writers can survive, but in undertaking the total reassessment of Black literature and literary history needed to reveal the Black woman-identified-women that Wilmette Brown and so many of us are looking for.

Although I have concentrated here upon what does not exist and what needs to be done, a few Black feminist critics have already begun this work. Gloria T. Hull at the University of Delaware has discovered in her research on Black women poets of the Harlem Renaissance that many of the women who are considered "minor" writers of the period were in constant contact with each other and provided both intellectual stimulation and psychological support for each other's work. At least one of these writers, Angelina Weld Grimké, wrote many unpublished love poems to women. Lorraine Bethel, a recent graduate of Yale College, has done substantial work on Black women writers, particularly in her senior essay, "This Infinity of Conscious Pain: Blues Lyricism and Hurston's Black Female Folk Aesthetic and Cultural Sensibility in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in which she brilliantly defines and uses the principles of Black feminist criticism. Elaine Scott at the State University of New York at Old Westbury is also involved in highly creative and politically resonant research on Hurston and other writers.

The fact that these critics are young, and except for Hull, unpublished merely indicates the impediments we face. Undoubtedly there are other women working and writing whom I do not even know, simply because there is no place to read them. As Michele Wallace states in her article, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood":

> We exist as women who are black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—[or our thoughts].[22]

I only hope that this essay is one way of breaking our silence and our isolation, of helping us to know each other.

Just as I did not know where to start I am not sure how to end. I feel that I have tried to say too much and at the same time have left too much unsaid. What I want this essay to do is lead everyone who reads it to examine *everything* that they have ever thought and believed about feminist culture and to ask themselves how their thoughts connect to the reality of Black women's writing and lives. I want to encourage in white women, as a first step, a sane accountability to all the women who write and live on this soil. I want most of all for Black women and Black lesbians somehow not to be so alone. This last will require the most expansive of revolutions as well as many new words to tell us how to make this revolution real. I finally want to express how much easier both my waking and my sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that would tell me something specific about my life. One book based in Black feminist and Black lesbian experience, fiction or non-fiction. Just one work to reflect the reality that I and the Black women whom I love are trying to create. When such a book exists then each of us will not only know better how to live, but how to dream.

---

1. Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in Ms., May 1974 and in Southern Exposure: Generations of Women in the South, Vol. 4, no. 4 (Winter 1977), pp. 60–64.

2. Jerry H. Bryant, "The Outskirts of a New City," in The Nation, 12 November 1973, p. 502.

3. Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (Yale University Press, New Haven: orig. c. 1958), p. 180.

4. Ibid. (Knock on Any Door is a novel by a Black writer, Willard Motley.)

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18. Elly Bulkin, "An Interview with Adrienne Rich: Part I," in Conditions: One, Vol. 1, no. 1, April 1977, p. 62.

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VILDEH CHAYA

Enid Dame

"The day before her hairdresser appointment, my mother says: 'By now I must look like a Vildeh Chaya.' *Neither of us knows that this Yiddish phrase means 'Wild animal' (or beast). I imagine it is the name of a woman. I imagine her in various incarnations."*

1
Vildeh Chaya
in the woods on the edge
of the shtetl she hides
mud-splattered dress torn
barefoot she won't
peel potatoes get married
cut her hair off have children
keep the milk dishes
separate
from the meat dishes.

Instead, she
climbs trees talks to animals
naked sings half-crazy
songs to the moon.

2
Vildeh Chaya
in New York
in the sexual sixties
lives in a tenement
toilet in hall
wall posters cats dirty sheets
learns to say "Fuck"
sleeps with men she meets
at peace demonstrations.

Later, she
cuts off her hair
sleeps with women
writes poetry.

3
Vildeh Chaya
in the suburbs lives alone
on Social Security
afraid of
her floor-length drapes
her glass-topped tables
the color television

her daughter's married
an Orthodox Jew
her son's hitch-hiked
off the edge of the world

she hides when the mailman knocks
keeps missing hairdresser appointments

at night, she creeps
around the development
avoiding swimming pools the glare
of headlights

she's starting to worry
she's starting to
like her smells.

from *conditions:3* 1978

MAN CHILD: A BLACK LESBIAN FEMINIST'S RESPONSE

Audre Lorde

Not only of a relationship, but of relating

This article is not a theoretical discussion of Les-bian Mothers and their Sons. Nor is it a how-t article. It is my attempt to scrutinize and to sha some pieces of that common history belonging to m son and me. I have two children: a 15½-year-ol daughter Beth, and a 14-year-old son Jonatha This is the way it was/is with me and Jonathan, an I leave the theory to another time or person.

This is one woman's telling. I have no golde message about the raising of sons for other lesbia mothers, no secret and effective elixir to transpos your questions into certain light. I have my ow ways of rewording those same questions, hoping we will all come to speak those questions and pieces o our lives we need to share, women making conta within ourselves and with each other across th restrictions of the printed page.

The truest direction comes from inside. I give th most strength to my children by being willing to loo within myself, and by being honest with them abou what I find there. In this way they learn to loo beyond their own fears.

Our children are outriders for a queendom not ye assured.

My adolescent son's growing sexuality is a rea dynamic between Jonathan and me. It would be presumptuous of me to discuss Jonathan's sexuali here, except to state my confidence that, whomeve he chooses to explore this area with, his choices wil be non-oppressive, joyful, and deeply felt from with

One of the difficulties in writing this piece at thi time has been temporal, since this is the summe when Jonathan is becoming a man, physically. An rest assured, our sons must become men—such men as we hope our daughters, born and unborn, will be pleased to live among. Our sons will not grow into

women, and so their way is more difficult than that of our daughters. For they must move away from us, without us. They will never be women. Instead, our sons have what they have learned from us, and a howness to forge it into their own image.

Our daughters have us, for measure or rebellion or outline or dream; the sons of lesbians are trail-blazers, having to make their own definitions of self as men. This is a position of both power and vulnerability, for the sons of lesbians have the advantage of our blueprints for survival, but they must take what we know and transpose it into their maleness. May the goddess be kind to my son, Jonathan.

When Jonathan makes me angriest, I always say he is bringing out the testosterone in me. What I mean is that he is representing some piece of myself as a woman that I am reluctant to acknowledge or explore. For instance, what does "acting like a man" mean? For me, what I reject? For Jonathan, what he is trying to redefine?

Raising black children female and male in the mouth of a racist, sexist, suicidal dragon is perilous and always chancy. If they cannot love and resist at the same time they will probably not survive; and in order to survive they must let go. This is what mothers teach, love, survival, that is, self-definition, and letting go. For each of these, the ability to feel strongly and to recognize those feelings is central; how to feel love, how not to fear and discount his own fear, how to enjoy feeling deeply.

I wish to raise a black man who will not be destroyed by, nor settle for, those corruptions that are called power by the white fathers who mean his destruction in the same ways that they mean mine. I wish to raise a black man who will recognize that the legitimate objects of his hostilities are not women, but the system which programs him to fear and despise women as well as his own black self.

This begins, for me, with teaching my son that I do not exist to do his feeling for him.

Men who are afraid to feel keep women around to do their feeling for them, while dismissing women for their supposedly "inferior" capacity to feel deeply.

from ***conditions:4*** 1979

3
when they first come
they screech with wildness
flinging themselves against the wall
and then against the bars.

some sit and cry for days
some never recover and
die.
        they are familiar
yet crap uncontrollably plead
shiver and rock. i refuse

to have anything to do with them
till they learn to behave.

4
at her arrival she was
stunned and bruised. she
folded up refusing to eat

her mouth grim. i staked
out my territory recognizing
her fierceness her strength.

but she weakened grew sick
was removed without resistance
returned three days later
shaved patches on her arms.

later she told me: we create
the responses around us.

5
i remember the grasp of her claws
the vicious bite the scar
still on my leg. she was crazed

jabbering then attacking
again. and the sun seemed to fall away
into coldness as i pressed myself
against the corner the hardened sand
under my nails. i began to gnaw
through concrete my face raw.

But in this way also, men deny themselves their own essential humanity.

Jonathan was 3½ when Frances, my lover, and I met; he was 7 when we all began to live together permanently. From the start, Frances' and my insistence that there be no secrets in our household about the fact that we were lesbians has been the source of surface problems and deep strengths for both children. In the beginning, this insistence grew out of the knowledge, on both our parts, that whatever was hidden could always be used either against the children or ourselves—one imperfect but useful argument for honesty. This is the knowledge of fear which can help make us free and about which I wrote in my poem, "School Note":

for the embattled
there is no place
that cannot be
home
nor is.

For survival, black children in america must be raised to be warriors. For survival, they must also be raised to recognize the real enemy's many faces. Black children of lesbian couples have an advantage because they learn, very early, that oppression comes in many different forms, having nothing to do with their own worth.

For perspective, it is important to remember that for years, in the name-calling at school, boys shouted at Jonathan not—"your mother's a lesbian," but rather—"your mother's a nigger."

When Jonathan was in the third grade we moved, and he went to a new school where his life was hellish as new boy on the block. He did not like to play rough games. He did not like to fight. He did not like to stone dogs. And all this marked him early on as an easy target.

When he came in crying one afternoon, I heard from Beth how the corner bullies were making Jonathan wipe their shoes on the way home whenever Beth wasn't there to fight them off. And when I heard that the ringleader was a little boy in

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Jonathan's class his own size, an interesting and very disturbing thing happened to me.

My fury at my own long-ago impotence, and my present pain at his suffering, made me start to forget all that I knew about violence and fear, and blaming the victim, I started to hiss at the weeping child, "The next time you come in here crying...," and I suddenly caught myself in horror.

This is the way we allow the destruction of our sons to begin, in the name of protection, and to ease our own pain. *My* son get beaten up? I was about to demand that he buy that first lesson in the corruption of power, that might makes right. I could hear myself beginning the age-old distortion and misinformation about what strength and bravery really were.

And no, Jonathan didn't have to fight if he didn't want to, but somehow he did have to feel better about not fighting. The old horror rolled over me of being the fat kid who ran away, terrified of getting her glasses broken.

About that time a very wise woman said to me, "Have you ever told Jonathan that once you used to be afraid, too?"

The idea seemed far-out to me at the time, but the next time he came in crying and sweaty from having run away again, I could see that in some way he felt shamed at having failed me, or some image he and I had created in his head of mother/woman. This image of being able to handle it all was bolstered by the fact that he lived in a household with three strong women, his lesbian parents and his forthright older sister. At home, for Jonathan, power was clearly female.

And because our society teaches us to think in an either/or mode—kill or be killed, dominate or be dominated—this meant that he must either surpass or be lacking. I could see the implications of this line of thought; consider the two western classic myth/models of mother/son relationships: Jocasta/Oedipus, the son who fucks his mother, and Clytemnestra/Orestes, the son who kills his mother.

It all felt connected to me.

I sat down on the hallway steps and took Jonathan on my lap and wiped his tears. "Did I ever tell you about how I used to be afraid when I was your age?"

I will never forget the look on that little boy's face as I told him the tale of my glasses and my after-school flights. It was a look of relief and total disbelief, all rolled into one.

For it is as hard for our children to believe that we are not omnipotent as it is for us to know it, as parents. But that knowledge is necessary as the first step in the reassessment of power as something other than might, age, privilege, and lack of fear. And for a boy, whose societal destruction begins when he is forced to believe that he can only be strong if he doesn't feel, or if he wins, it is an important step.

I thought about all this one year later when Beth and Jonathan, 10 and 9, were asked by an interviewer how they thought they had been affected by being children of a feminist.

Jonathan said that he didn't think there was too much in feminism for boys, although it certainly was good to be able to cry if he felt like it, and not to have to play football if he didn't want to.

The strongest lesson I can teach my son is the same lesson I teach my daughter, how to be who he wishes to be for himself. And the best way I can do this is to be who I am, and hope that he will learn from this not how to be me, which is not possible, but how to be himself. And this means how to move to that voice from within himself, rather than to those raucous and persuasive or threatening voices from outside himself, pressuring him to be what the world wants him to be.

And that is hard enough.

Jonathan is learning to find within himself some of the different faces of courage and strength, whatever he chooses to call them. Two years ago, when Jonathan was 12 and in the seventh grade, one of his friends at school who had been to the house persisted in calling Frances "the maid." When Jonathan corrected him, the boy then referred to her as "the cleaning woman." Finally Jonathan said, simply, "Frances is not the cleaning woman, she's my mother's lover." Interestingly enough, it is the teachers at this school who still have not recovered from his openness.

Frances and I were considering attending a Lesbian/Feminist conference this summer, when we were

notified that no boys over 10 were allowed. This presented logistic as well as philosophical problems for us, and we sent the following letter:

> Sisters: Ten years as an interracial lesbian couple has taught us both the dangers of an over-simplified approach to the nature and solutions of any oppression, as well as the danger inherent in an incomplete vision.
>
> Our 13-year-old son represents as much hope for our future world as does our 15-year-old daughter, and we are not willing to abandon him to the killing streets of New York City while we journey west to help form a Lesbian/Feminist vision of the future world in which we can all survive and flourish. I hope we can continue this dialogue in the near future, as I feel it is important to our vision and our survival.

The question of separatism is by no means simple. I am thankful that one of my children is male, since that helps to keep me honest. Every line I write shrieks there are no easy solutions.

I grew up in largely female environments, and I know how crucial that has been to my own development. I feel the want and need often for the society of women, exclusively. I recognize that our own spaces are essential for developing and recharging.

As a black woman, I find it necessary to withdraw into all-black groups at times for exactly the same reasons—differences in stages of development, and differences in levels of interaction. Frequently, when speaking with men and white women, I am reminded of how difficult and time-consuming it is to have to re-invent the pencil every time you want to send a message.

But this does not mean that my responsibility for my son's education stops at age 10, any more than it does for my daughter. However, for each of them, it does grow less and less as they become more woman and man.

Both Beth and Jonathan need to know what they can share, and what they cannot, how they are joined, and how they are not. And we, as grown women and lesbians coming more and more into our power, need to relearn the experience that difference does not have to be threatening.

When I envision the future, I think of the world I

crave for my daughters and sons. It is thinking for survival of the species—thinking for life.

Most likely there will always be women who move with women, women who live with men, men who choose men. I work for a time when women with women, women with men, men with men, all share a world that does not barter bread or self for obedience, nor beauty, nor love. And in that world we will raise our children free to choose how best to fulfill themselves. For we are all jointly responsible for the care and raising of the young, since *that* they be raised is a function, ultimately, of the species.

Within that tripartite pattern of relating/existence, the raising of the young will be the joint responsibility of all adults who choose to be associated with children. Obviously, the children raised within each of these three relationships will be different, lending a special savor to that eternal inquiry into how best can we live our lives.

Jonathan was 3½ when Frances and I met. He is now 14 years old. The living perspective that having lesbian parents has brought to Jonathan is a valuable addition to his humanness.

Jonathan has had the advantage of growing up within a truly non-sexist relationship, one in which this society's pseudo-natural assumptions of ruler/ruled are being challenged. And this is not only because Frances and I are lesbians, for unfortunately, there are some lesbians who are still locked into the patriarchal patterns of unequal power relationships.

These assumptions of power relationships are being questioned because Frances and I, often painfully and with varying degrees of success, attempt always to evaluate and measure over and over again our feelings concerning power, our own and others'. And we explore with care those areas concerning how it is used and expressed between us and between us and the children, openly and otherwise. A good part of our bi-weekly family meetings are devoted to this exploration.

As parents, Frances and I have given Jonathan much love, our openness, and some stuff to help form his visions from. Most importantly, as the son of

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lesbians, he has had an invaluable model—not only of a relationship—but of relating.

In talking over this paper with Jonathan and asking his permission to share some pieces of his life, I ended by asking him what he felt were the strongest negative and the strongest positive aspects for him in having grown up with lesbian parents.

He said that the strongest benefit which he felt he had gained was that he knew a lot more about people than most other kids his age that he knew, and that he did not have a lot of the hangups that some other boys did about men and women.

And the most negative aspect he felt, Jonathan said, was the ridicule from some kids with straight parents.

"You mean, from your peers?" I said.

"Oh no," he answered promptly. "My peers know better. I mean other kids."

SESTINA FOR BRIGHT CLOUD, SINGING (BUT NOT THE BLUES)

Marilyn Krysl

To liberate women is not
to manufacture washing machines.
—Mao Tse Tung

In China
women hold up
half the sky. Guess who
holds up the other half.
The men are planting
rice, and manufacturing tractors

and washing machines and more tractors
so it can't be the men. In China
one day I was planting
my feet on and keeping my shoulder to and holding up
my half
of the conversation when Guess Who

walked by. "Guess who's
driving the tractor
today," I said, and with the other half
of my mouth crooned the baby a Chinese
lullaby, while holding up
the turtle, the elephant and the man and planting

a little rice with my third eye. "Planting
is man's work," said miffed and muttering Guess Who.
"Comrade, pardner, amigo, pal, you are holding up
progress," I said, and plowed him under with my tractor.
Here under the great blue sky of China
things have been quiet lately. Half

the time I read Emma Goldman and the other half
I rock, feed and change the baby, plant
rice, oats, peas, beans and barley, and compose Chinese
proverbs for the Fortune Cookie Company. Guess Who's
grave is green. And when the tractor
breaks, I lie down under it and sing. I hold up

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pretty well, as Grandma used to say. Hold up
this sky a minute will you, while I solder these two halves
of this old Chinese proverb back together. *One tractor's*
not enough for a woman like you, I sing, planting
Chinese parsley tenderly over Guess Who:
he's favoring progress at last. In China

holding up your half's easier without interference
Guess who's planting peach trees today! Bright Cloud says,
FOR A SMOOTH CHINESE REVOLUTION, GET A TRACTOR.

Lyn Lifshin

you can tell a lot about people by the way they grocery shop—people who munch their way thru the aisles, sampling and tasting, feel they've been dealt a rotten blow by life and want to try to make up for it by getting what they can when they can.

—Sonia Frieda

First I go after
the grapes the
green ones the
seedless it's
harder with their
skin pressed so
they can't be
touched under
cellophane tho I've
pulled glass around
me too it's sort
of a challenge to
punch holes in
the cardboard suck
the green from
behind. Peaches
are messy apples
usually too big the
opened up packages
aren't much fun
soggy popcorn wet
cracker jacks. Once
I ate a huge pickle
between the deli
and the line. In
some health stores you
can get a whole
lunch soybeans
with onion garlic
sesame bread papaya
juice. It makes
Wednesday sweet to

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finish 12 raspberry
caramels or some
chocolate covered
creams falling
up and down aisles
wrappers crunched
in a sleeve or a
bra it's more exciting
to ride them in
the crotch of nylon
panties and not pay
for once

they took her away
and when she came back
she did not look at me.

6
scatter yourself
i told her moving
myself into the left
corner where i sat
observing the movement
of her head.
she nodded
seemed to sleep
then stood up pointing
outside. the leaves were
red. it was a falling time
noisy dry twigs cracking
off nearby trees. i felt

content watching myself
while she pointed the leaves
red.

7
and finally
she said this is enough
and began to bang her head
against the wall one thud

after another thud she batted
herself beginning to bleed
throwing herself and falling.

they came and tried to seize
her while the sun vanished
and the trees moved slowly

and everyone so still
afraid to breathe: the moon
all fresh and the birds
small balls of feathers.

i puked as they dragged her out:
tufts of fur on the stone floor.

BEFORE I DRESS AND SOAR AGAIN

Donna Allegra

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

from ***conditions:5*** 1979

TAR BEACH
Audre Lorde

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here and there throughout the room the flash of brightly colored below-the-knee full skirts over low-necked tight bodices could be seen, along with tight

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sheath dresses and the shine of thin high heels next to bucks and sneakers and loafers.

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

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

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

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

The room's particular mix of heat-smells, music,

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

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

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

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

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

"Afrekete," she said, snapping her fingers in time to the rhythm of it and giving a long laugh. "That's me. The black pussycat." She laughed again. "I like your hairdo. Are you a singer?"

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

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

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

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

from ***conditions:4*** 1979

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

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

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

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

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

work and school were gay-girls who lived in the Village as I did, most of whom were white.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Crossing 59th Street, I had an acute moment of panic. Who was this woman? Suppose she really

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

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

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

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

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

We came out of the park drive at Seventh Avenue and 110th Street, and as quickly as the light changed

from *conditions:4* 1979

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

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

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

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

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

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

Something about Kitty made me feel like a roller-

8
when she died i mourned
a silent mourning.
                    and
the others asked
asked asked
and poked at me.

there had been much between us
in gesture. mostly i remember
her yellowed teeth her attempt
at tameness.

9
there had been no sound:
just the motion of our hands
our lips sucked in
toes pointed outward.
it had been enough.

                    dizzy
with messages i would lie
down dream of different
enclosures.

from ***conditions:1*** 1977

coaster, rocketing from idiot to goddess. By the time we had collected her mail from the broken mailbox and then climbed six flights of stairs up to her front door I felt that there had never been anything else my body had ever intended to do more than to reach inside of her coat and take Afrekete into my arms, fitting her body into the curves of mine tightly, her beige camel's-hair billowing around us both and her gloved hand still holding the door key.

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

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

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

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

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

I woke to her house suffused in that light, the sky

from ***conditions:4*** 1979

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

How many times into summer that year I turned into that block from Eighth Avenue, the saloon on the corner spilling a smell of sawdust and liquor onto the street, along with a shifting and indeterminate number of young and old black men taking turns sitting on two upturned milk crates playing checkers or cards. I would turn the corner into 113th Street towards the park, my steps quickening and my fingertips tingling to play in her earth.

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

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

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

After I held you, I lay between your brown legs slowly playing my tongue through your familiar forests, slowly licking and swallowing as the deep undulations and tidal motions of your strong body slowly mashed the ripe banana into a beige cream

that mixed with the juices of your electric flesh. Then our bodies met again, each surface touched with each other's flame from the tips of our curled toes to our tongues, and locked into our own wild rhythms we rode each other across the thundering space.

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

Sometimes Afrekete sang in a small club further uptown on Sugar Hill, sometimes she clerked in a Gristedes Market on 97th Street and Amsterdam, and sometimes with no warning at all she'd appear at the Sea Colony or Pony Stable or Page Three or Grapevine on Saturday night. Once, even, I came home to Seventh Street late one night to find her sitting on my stoop at 3:00 A.M. after the bars had closed with a bottle of beer in her hand and a piece of bright African cloth wrapped around her head. We sped uptown through the dawn empty city with a summer thunder squall crackling above us and the wet streets singing beneath the wheels of her little Nash Rambler.

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

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

We talked sometimes about what it meant to love women, what a relief it was in the eye of the storm, no matter how often we had to bite our tongues and stay silent. Afrekete had a seven-year-old daughter whom she had left with her mama down in Georgia, and we shared a lot of our dreams. "She's going to be able to love anybody she wants to love," Afrekete

said fiercely, lighting a Lucky Strike. "Same way's she's going to be able to work any place she damn well pleases. Her mama's going to see to that."

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

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

And the sun filtered down upon us through the dusty windows and the mass of green plants that Afrekete tended religiously. I took a ripe avocado and rolled it between my hands until the skin became a green case for the soft mashed fruit inside, a hard pit at the core. Then I rose from a kiss in your mouth to nibble a hole in the fruit skin near its navel stalk, and I squeezed the pale yellow-green fruit juice in thin ritual lines back and forth over and around your coconut brown belly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And now I think the goddess was speaking through Ella also, but Ella was too beaten down and anesthetized by David's brutality for her to believe in her own mouth, and we, Gennie and I, we were too arrogant and childish—not without right or reason, for we were indeed still or scarcely more than children—we were too arrogant or frightened to see that our survival might very well lay in listening to the shuffling, sweeping woman's tuneless song.

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

from ***conditions:4*** 1979

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

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

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

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

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

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

When we came down from the roof later it was into the sweltering midnight of a west Harlem sum-

from *conditions:4* 1979

mer, with canned music in the streets and the disagreeable whines of overtired and overheated children. Nearby, mothers and fathers sat on stoops or milk crates and striped camp chairs fanning themselves absently and talking or thinking about work as usual tomorrow and not enough sleep.

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

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

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

from *conditions:4* 1979

THE TIRED POEM

Kate Rushin

Last Letter From A Typical Unemployed Black Professional Woman

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

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

from ***conditions:5*** 1979

Still you remember the last time you said hey
So you keep on walking
What you too good to speak
Don't nobody want you no way Ho'

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

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

So you try to talk to your friend
About the train and the park and everything
And how it all seems somehow connected

from ***conditions:5*** 1979

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

$10 for a piece
So you're waiting for the bus
And you look at this young Black man
Asking if you want to make some money
You look at him for a long time
You imagine the little dingy room at the Y
It would only take 20 minutes or less
You think about how you only get $15 for spending
    all day with 30 kids
And how nobody is offering you
Any cash for your poems
You remember again how you have the advantage
How you're not taking care of business
How this man is somebody's kid brother or cousin
    and could be your own
So you try to explain how $10 wouldn't pay for what
    you'd have to give up
He pushes a handful of sticky crumbled dollars into
    your face and says
Why not
You think I can't pay
Look at that roll
Don't tell me you don't need the money
Cause I know you do
I'll give you 15

from ***conditions:5*** 1979

TOWARD A BLACK FEMINIST CRITICISM

Barbara Smith

For all my sisters, especially Beverly and Demita

I do not know where to begin. Long before I tried to write this I realized that I was attempting something unprecedented, something dangerous merely by writing about Black women writers from a feminist perspective and about Black lesbian writers from any perspective at all. These things have not been done. Not by white male critics, expectedly. Not by Black male critics. Not by white women critics who think of themselves as feminists. And most crucially not by Black women critics who, although they pay the most attention to Black women writers as a group, seldom use a consistent feminist analysis or write about Black lesbian literature. All segments of the literary world—whether establishment, progressive, Black, female, or lesbian—do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist.

For whites, this specialized lack of knowledge is inextricably connected to their not knowing in any concrete or politically transforming way that Black women of any description dwell in this place. Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the "real world" of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown.

This invisibility, which goes beyond anything that either Black men or white women experience and tell about in their writing, is one reason it is so difficult for me to know where to start. It seems overwhelming to break such a massive silence. Even more numbing, however, is the realization that so many of the women who will read this have not yet noticed us missing either from their reading matter, their politics, or their lives. It is galling that ostensible feminists and acknowledged lesbians have been

from ***conditions:2*** 1977

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

Then
(Is it suddenly)
Your voice gets loud
And fills the night street
Your voice gets louder and louder
Your bus comes
The second shift people file on
The watchmen and nurse's aides
Look at you like you're crazy
Get on the damn bus
And remember
You blew it
He turns away
Your bus pulls off
There is no one on the street but you

And then
It is
Very
Quiet

from ***conditions:5*** 1979

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

Toi Derricotte

1
Blood sister,
our fingers join beneath the veins
beneath the skin
where the secret blood
dams the heart's flow

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

2

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

3
I watch the light
that pumps your heart
I worship whatever dream
made you appear on this earth
& walk in your own
solitary way

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

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

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

4
Sister,
do not marry
to forget
do not have children
to own your own life
do not marry a man
to wave you in the wind
like his banner

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

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

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AN OLD DYKE'S TALE

Elly Bulkin

an interview with Doris Lunden

Born in New Orleans in 1936, Doris Lunden came out into the French Quarter in 1953. She left New Orleans in 1957, lived briefly in Corpus Christi, and moved to New York City (where she still lives) in 1959. Since her recovery from alcoholism, she has been active in various lesbian organizations. Currently she is working with DONT (Dykes Opposed to Nuclear Technology). She is about to become a grandmother.

Cathy Cockrell assisted in editing this interview.

EB: I thought we could start with talking about your coming out and with your experiences of being a lesbian in the fifties.

DL: I started coming out when I was 13, when I fell in love with Gloria, the girl down the block. I wasn't really conscious that this was a taboo until my aunt began to react to my being so open about my feelings. It was just after that time that I heard the word "lesbian" and I went to the library to do the research that I think has been done by so many lesbians throughout history. From that time I realized that I should be quiet about my feelings. It was just after that that I found *The Well of Loneliness* at the drugstore bookracks—of course I went back to that bookrack, I haunted it, and I found other books, perhaps half a dozen. Before that time I had no inkling how many lesbians there might be. Then I did at least get the idea that there were probably some more in my city.

I was in reform school and I had a lover there. After I got out, my lover's father was in prison and when he got out of prison he used to be able to take her out on the last Sunday of the month and she'd want to come and see me. So he would take her to my house. He took us to a place called The Starlet Lounge once, which was a gay bar that I later came out into, which was in the French Quarter in New Orleans. I realize now that he knew that we were lovers and was saying

it was neat, which was really quite amazing. But then he went back to jail and that set-up ended and I went back to reform school eventually.

EB: What were you in for?

DL: The first time I was running away all the time and they kept threatening me with the House of the Good Shepherd every time they retrieved me. The House of the Good Shepherd was like a convent operated by Catholic nuns, but it was funded by the city as a reformatory for girls. It occupied a whole block in New Orleans and had a big wall around it; all the windows had shutters and it was used to scare every little girl in New Orleans into conformity. I think that one of the greatest things I ever did was that I finally accepted that I did not want to remain where I was and that I was eventually going to go to this place and I went and put myself in. I went up and I rang the bell and I said, "I don't have any place else to go," and they took me in. I hoped that it would force my father into finding someplace to live where I could live with him, and it did.

EB: Were you living with your aunt?

DL: No, I was living with a woman that I called my aunt who'd been a friend of my mother. I lived with an awful lot of people after my mother died when I was about 10. I lived primarily with my godmother, a woman who had also been a friend of my mother. Traditionally in French families godmothers really do take responsibility for the children if something happens to the mother. My godmother and I had an incredible struggle about power and control and independence and so on. So I would run away. And I used to run to my father when I was younger but he'd always bring me back, so I saw that I had to get by on my own. I guess two weeks was the most that I managed to avoid the cops. They'd find me. But once you've been in reform school it's very easy to go back. Next time I got into trouble I was sent back to reform school. We were stealing license plates from wrecked cars and selling them. It was a little racket. But because I had already been there, I just got sent back. It was in reform school that I first heard about the Goldenrod which was a lesbian bar;

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it was in a residential area out near the lakefront, in the suburbs.

EB: What year was that?

DL: Probably '52 or '53. I was about 16. (I was born in '36.) So I got up my courage and decided to go to this bar. It was just beautiful, it was full of women and they were friendly and they invited me to sit at their tables, introduced themselves, introduced me around. Then I met a woman there that I liked....

I guess it was a couple of weeks, it wasn't very long after and I was there with a girl I had been in reform school with. I was 16, she was 15. All of a sudden all the lights went on, the jukebox stopped, the police came in and said that it was a raid and everyone was under arrest. Poor Pat! She gave her real age and I never saw her again after that; I'm sure she was sent back to the House of the Good Shepherd. I didn't lie about my name; somehow I thought they'd know I was lying about my name so I gave them my real name and I gave them my real address, but I lied about my age—I said I was 18. They took us all to the precinct and booked us and put us in a cell. Then later that night or early in the morning the owner got us out on bond and they set the court date for the next night. Some women were saying that there'd been reporters outside and they were really scared.

The next morning I went down to the drugstore (the same one where I had found *The Well of Loneliness)* to get a cup of coffee and bought the newspaper and started looking for the police reports, where most arrests were reported in the paper. My father religiously read the police reports, so I knew he was going to find out about it if it was in the police report. It wasn't there and I was so relieved. Then I turned back to see what the news of the day was and the headline said, "64 Women, 1 Man Arrested." There were all kinds of remarks about what kind of bar it was, about the sign saying "no males allowed."

That night we had to go to court and I discovered then that they had raided every gay bar in New Orleans. It was like a big cleanup. I had never seen so many gay people in my whole life, I had no idea

that there were so many gay people. It was really exciting! I almost forgot to be scared about whether I would be convicted or not. My case was dismissed, but I think that that set me free in some way.

EB: Were the other cases dismissed?

DL: I think they were. There may have been instances where people were found guilty of something; usually the charges were things like "wearing the clothes of the opposite sex" for drag queens and for butch lesbians, or "no honest, visible means of support." It was true, most of us didn't have any honest visible means of support. If you chose to dress in such a way that clearly identified you as gay, it was impossible to get any kind of straight job, assuming you would want one. Most often all of those charges were dismissed when you came before a judge; I don't know why particularly, except that I believe the arresting was intended as a kind of harassment—when it was intense enough it drove people away.

Some of us just didn't have any other place to go. We were just caught every time they happened to walk in when we were there. Whereas for other people, just being there in that bar was one of the riskiest things they'd ever done in their lives. If they even witnessed an arrest, even if they didn't get taken in, it was usually sufficient to scare them away for years to come. You see how this kind of stuff works to limit what kinds of risks people take. When I look back at that now, I am really amazed that people were persistent, I really wonder why I was unconscious that I was part of a resistance.

You can guess what happened to the lives of all those women as a result of that raid. Most of them were closeted, were from New Orleans, many of them living with their families and with jobs. I think they thought they were pretty safe there in that bar. It was probably shocking to them to get included in that sweep.

Back at home, I was just dismissing it by saying, well, I just went to see what kind of bar it was and it happened to be the night. My father didn't pursue it, but my brother, who was a year younger than I, was really freaked out by this. When I had gotten out of

reform school he had this girlfriend whom he was really crazy about and could hardly wait to have me meet her. I did meet her and gradually she began to follow me around and to take my side in the arguments we had and stopped seeing him. What I discovered later was that everybody in the neighborhood was speculating that I was a lesbian and they literally did follow us around and peek in windows to see if we were kissing. I think he was angry about this kind of stuff when here I get arrested in this bar and it's real clear that I was a lesbian. He became hostile and we had a really bad fight in which I was hurt and that's when I left home.

I was hurt really bad and I called up this woman whom I had been seeing from the Goldenrod and told her what had happened and she said, "Take a cab and come over." I wound up living with her for a while. Actually I wound up living with her off and on for a year and a half.

But then I was free. The cat was out of the bag. I didn't have anybody that I had to worry about any more and I could go ahead and explore whatever it was I wanted to do. I didn't have any idea what I was going to do to make a living, I didn't even think about it. I had lived in a family or in a number of families where nobody was really in a profession. I guess my godfather, who was a merchant seaman, was the most in a profession of anyone that I knew. The only person that I knew who went to college was my mother—somebody famous from her hometown had put her through college. So I didn't have too many notions about what I was going to do. I always knew I wasn't going to get married, but I didn't have any plans about what I was going to do to take care of myself.

Then I began dressing up and wearing these clothes that were taboo before. I had already had short hair but now I really began to go at it and I got a crew cut and blue suede shoes like Elvis Presley was singing about.

But I had an economic problem—I was totally dependent on this woman whom I was involved with. She was living with her husband and her four children. She had her room and he had his room and

she had to visit him once a week. But she was otherwise free to pursue her own interests as long as she took care of the house, and he would go to work and bring the money in. When I lived with her I lived there in her room in his house. That was very weird, considering the head I was coming from, the kind of role I imagined myself playing. Some time before the raid, I had read in *Sexology* magazine about Christine Jorgenson and sex change operations. I really started thinking that that's what it was—my *feelings* are natural so it must be my *body* that's wrong, and it's too bad they don't have an operation for me. I think at that time, before I found a community, I would have been very willing to have an operation in order to set things right. I had an awful lot of the kind of values that I thought I should have if I was a boy, that I would want to get married and support my wife and all that. That was really at odds with what was going on, which was that I was living with this woman in her husband's house. I didn't even dare say anything, I had no economic power.

We were going to all these bars and I was observing, I was learning—it was like school for me. I saw that a lot of butches had "old ladies" who were prostitutes. Some of them had several "old ladies" and that was called "sister-in-lawing"; they actually lived together, two or three "old ladies" and a butch. That was *very* admired, that was a pimp par excellence. But I was coming from too square a place to relate to that at the time, so the only option for me was prostitution. I didn't even expect to get a job in a bar at that time, I wasn't even of age but nobody knew it.

So one night Virginia and I were at the bar and this guy propositioned me and I went with him. I'd never been in bed with a man in my life so I thought I'd find out.... God, it was really, really awful. But I got the $20 and I came back and I tried to buy a drink for Virginia and she wouldn't let me; a lot of people were upset because they knew I had never done anything like that before. And that was the end of it. Except that in a few months I realized that I was pregnant. Once I was pregnant I figured "I can't get any more pregnant" and I needed money so during

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that period, until I was too pregnant, I was a prostitute. I didn't do anything different—I didn't dress up or do anything like that—but there were plenty of people coming into those bars looking for sex and there were a lot of men who, I think, felt more like men if they could get a lesbian to go to bed with them.

EB: They thought they were going to change your life.

DL: It seemed really important to them that you said that you enjoyed it. So I just saw it as an acting job basically. Lila and I were buddies—she was a drag butch like I was. We used to do shows together and we thought this was hysterical because we were both stone butches so we would never have anything to do with each other sexually; but we would just put on these great shows that we'd make a lot of money for—and I can just remember laughing in her cunt while all these guys would think we were sexually excited.

Lila had been kicked out of college for being a lesbian. She came from a middle-class background. She, too, got pregnant. She went home to her family after the baby was born. Her parents were taking care of the baby and she came back and very shortly got pregnant again and then she went back and was finally going to get married.

Between living with Virginia and being on my own I spent the next 4 years in those bars. I went from being a prostitute to learning to be a pimp, although we didn't call them pimps. I had a lot of lovers who were strippers. Strippers make money not so much by dancing but by B-drinking. I did B-drinking too, looking to roll somebody if they were flashing a lot of money. After Linda was born, I was real careful, I didn't want to get pregnant again. But I did a lot of other stuff like sex shows. A lot of people did.

When I came out in the bars of the French Quarter, I was coming from a place of being mad as hell that I was a girl, because clearly it was a boy's world. Later on I was falling in love with other girls and thinking of myself as a man trapped in a woman's body—I think I bought that kind of an idea for quite a long time. And when I did hit the bars, I

so blinded to the implications of any womanhood that is not white womanhood and that they have yet to struggle with the deep racism in themselves that is at the source of this blindness.

I think of the thousands and thousands of books, magazines and articles which have been devoted, by this time, to the subject of women's writing and I am filled with rage at the fraction of those pages that mention Black and other Third-World women. I finally do not know how to begin because in 1977 I want to be writing this for a Black feminist publication, for Black women who know and love these writers as I do and who, if they do not yet know their names, have at least profoundly felt the pain of their absence.

The conditions that coalesce into the impossibilities of this essay have as much to do with politics as with the practice of literature. Any discussion of Afro-American writers can rightfully begin with the fact that for most of the time we have been in this country we have been categorically denied not only literacy, but the most minimal possibility of a decent human life. In her landmark essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Alice Walker discloses how the political, economic and social restrictions of slavery and racism have historically stunted the creative lives of Black women.[1]

At the present time I feel that the politics of feminism have a direct relationship to the state of Black Women's literature. A viable, autonomous Black feminist movement in this country would open up the space needed for the exploration of Black women's lives and the creation of consciously Black woman-identified art. At the same time a redefinition of the goals and strategies of the white feminist movement would lead to much needed change in the focus and content of what is now generally accepted as women's culture.

I want to make in this essay some connections between the politics of Black women's lives, what we write about and our situation as artists. In order to do this I will look at how Black women have been viewed critically by outsiders, demonstrate the necessity for Black feminist criticism and try to un-

had the right kind of build, I could pass as a boy and that was valued. It was considered really good that I had such small breasts, I didn't even have to wear a breastband. Women used to wrap their breasts, strap them down so that they wouldn't show. I didn't have to do that in order to pass. So that gave me more mobility, I could go outside into the "American Zone" (outside the French Quarter). If you were an obvious lesbian in an area where you weren't known or you didn't have friends, you could get the hell beaten out of you.

What I discovered when I hit the bars was very extreme butch and femme and that seemed to fit with my notion of having boys' feelings and so on. I was a no-touch butch. If you didn't pick a role—butch or femme—and stick with that, people thought you were mixed up and you didn't know who you were and you were laughed at and called "ki-ki"—a sort of queer of the gay world.

Butches were also vulnerable in that if you slept with a woman and let that woman *touch you, she could turn around and brag about that to everybody and ridicule you publicly.* This was called "flipping a butch." It was a really long time before I realized that there might have been another reason why I chose my role and that had to do with wanting to be in control. As the butch, I felt I was in control; if I wasn't letting anybody touch me sexually, I would be in control. The fear of being passive was something I never really had to confront until the women's movement. I did confront it from time to time because my emotions would sometimes be in conflict with what I thought was in my best interests. With a lover who wanted to make love to me too, I would feel excited, but I also felt that there were very good reasons why I shouldn't allow that to happen, because of how it might affect my privileges, how it might affect my standing in the community.

EB: Did you find that there was more flexibility when you were involved in more serious or long-term relationships?

DL: My feeling now is that most lesbians into roles cheated a whole lot more than I did. I really took all that more seriously than they did and I believe that

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part of the reason for that was that this other personal thing was going on—that I was really afraid of my feelings and afraid of not being in control. I never had to look at that as a personal problem to deal with until I got involved in the women's movement.

After I left home my brother found out that I hung out in The Starlet Lounge and he and his friends used to come and taunt us. There was nothing that could be done about that because that's what the bars were, that's where they made their money—with the tourists coming to look at the queers. We were only a small part of the population of the bar actually—we were the sideshow. No wonder we did all the drugs and stuff. I didn't acknowledge to myself that I was part of a sideshow and that I was on display, but that was exactly what it was.

The bars weren't integrated at all. I remember one time we went to an all-Black bar. Somebody knew somebody there. It was literally illegal for white people to go to an all-Black place, or vice versa.

EB: Was it a gay bar?

DL: It was a huge place where some gay people went, the Penguin Club.

EB: Did you have problems when you went?

DL: No, but it was a really amazing experience for me, because I grew up in New Orleans during segregation—I never went to school with any Black children. I lived in poor neighborhoods, so there were Black people in the neighborhoods. But it was as if there was some kind of invisible wall—we didn't even go to the same movie theater. That's part of how you would develop some kind of social contact between groups of people. We didn't drink out of the same water fountain, which created certain fantasies or larger-than-life feelings or ideas—I'm sure much the way that a lot of people feel about *Lesbians*—that *Black* people were completely different. I remember when I was little I was told that Black people had blue blood—and I believed it until I saw a Black man come staggering out of a bar having been stabbed in the abdomen and bleeding.

To go into this Penguin Club it was as if I were doing the *most taboo* thing to be there. They said that if the police come in to tell them that you know

the owner and that would make it OK if you were a personal friend of the owner. I don't know what the hell we'd have been charged with. I danced with this Black woman there and I remember feeling as if I were doing this really exciting, daring thing. The feeling, I think, both ways was a lot of curiosity and amusement—it was friendly, like we came from different planets and had an encounter somewhere. That's what it felt like.

Later, when I was about 4 months pregnant I went to Chicago for about a month and I was just amazed that the bars were integrated and there were Black bus drivers. It amazed me how this just happened and it didn't disrupt anything at all. I was coming from a city where the buses had a divider that said "for colored only" and whites could move the divider back and forth and all of the Black people had to sit in back of it. I had never thought to question that Black people had to sit in the back of the bus or that there were different drinking fountains. I was plenty curious about what the water tasted like in the "colored only" drinking fountain. But I never had any friends who were Black—not until New York, not until the early sixties. Eventually I was driven out of New Orleans by the police.

EB: How did they do that?

DL: The charges began to get more serious and they began to do things like break the door down and tear the whole apartment apart looking for drugs. And I was using some drugs and the chances were that sooner or later they would catch me—I wasn't any big drug dealer and I wasn't a junkie, but everybody fooled around with some drugs in that kind of situation at that time. They arrested my lover for prostitution and she was convicted and given a suspended sentence, probably because she was white and had no record. They picked her up at our house where she had brought a john. They offered to make a deal that if we'd pay them $250 they wouldn't show up at court to testify and we paid them and they showed up to testify. We knew that it was going to be really bad from there on out.

We had a chance to get out so we did. We were in

Corpus Christi, Texas for a year and a half before coming to New York.

When I came to New York in the late fifties my brother had come out and he was living there with a drag queen who was working at a club on Second Avenue called the Ace of Clubs. Anyhow his lover got me a job working there—it was all female impersonators in the show and all lesbians wearing tuxedos or black suits and ties waiting tables. My lover Sunny stayed in Texas to find a home for the animals and then she came up. I didn't like that job at that Ace of Clubs.

I had a lot of attitudes after we got out of New Orleans about what I had been involved in and a lot of sense of shame about it. I kind of wanted to "go straight," morally speaking. That was fed into me by Sunny. It took me a long time to realize that she really thought that she was better than me—she had had a couple of years of college before she ran away, and her family had money and she'd lived in Hawaii for a while. I've had this experience a lot with middle-class lovers—I've had this sort of fatal attraction for girls from the other side of the tracks—I guess there's something fascinating about women whose lives have been different. And some pretty self-oppressive attitudes of thinking that they *were* made of finer stuff. I call this the "diamond in the rough" syndrome. Many of my lovers have seen me as a diamond in the rough and they were going to polish me up—and to some extent they have.

So Sunny met this gay man in a donut shop who was an aspiring dancer and through him we met some other people. They were all sort of intellectual; I was kind of attracted by all this but I wasn't well received by them. They loved Sunny, but they couldn't get past the way I dressed. I was dying to go to the opera and see *Carmen* and I thought I'd just wear my suit and go to the opera. But they just freaked! Someone loaned me a dress and I went to the opera and I began to accept that part of going straight. By this time I had a job in a factory and I had to wear a skirt to work. Nobody said I had to wear a skirt; in fact I think I probably looked weirder in a skirt because no matter how I dressed I would

not give up my hair. I wore a lot of hair oil in my hair and it was a slicked back Tony Curtis type hairstyle. No matter how I modified my clothes, my hair stayed the same. Even when I thought I looked passable—everyone knows I'm a woman, they won't mistake me for a man—that was when I looked the most bizarre.

I was involved in a group that read plays. I was reading everything, I was consuming, I was soaking up culture, I was feeling excited by all this. I was in this group that read plays so I could get rid of my southern accent; I believed, and nobody disputed, that it sounded uneducated, ignorant. I made some efforts at modifying how I dressed to try to fit in with a group of people who I wanted some kind of intellectual stimulation from. Their attitude toward me was always that I was very bright (diamond in the rough) and that nobody would ever be able to tell that I didn't have a couple of years of college. I felt *incredibly* inadequate about my ninth-grade education. They used to say if I was going to try to get a job that I should just lie and claim I'd had a couple of years of college. I couldn't do it; I felt the gaps, no matter how much I read and how much I knew, I could never be sure that there weren't these *big* gaps that were perfectly obvious.

About that time Sunny and I broke up and I began to get involved with Jeanie, who lived on the top floor and up till then had been straight. All of our friends were gay or knew lots of gay people, but were freaked out about *us*. She was also very reluctant to get involved with me because she didn't want to be a lesbian. In the midst of all this I got word about my daughter. I had given her up for adoption when she was a year old although I had a lot of guilt about it. There was an agreement that I would be able to see her and when she was older she would know that I was her mother. Instead they just disappeared after the papers were signed.

EB: You knew the people who adopted her?

DL: Yes, a guy who was the manager of one of the bars that I hung out in and his wife. In fact she took off with Linda and left him. This was some 3 years later. My godmother was calling to say that she was

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going to adopt my daughter, that the woman was no longer able to take care of her. By this time my life had changed enough that I felt I could take care of Linda. *Everybody* got involved. We got money together and I flew down there to get to her. There was this big scene and I got her. Nobody wanted to give her to me because I was a lesbian; I went down there pretending that I wasn't a lesbian anymore and was on the verge of getting married.

EB: So she had been legally adopted.

DL: Yes, she had. I never did get her back legally. But I got her up here and once I did I changed addresses and disappeared. She was 4½ then.

Jeanie and I moved in together and we became like this little family. I would never have made it without Jeanie. We were very isolated because none of our friends could accept that we were lovers; it made them all uncomfortable, perhaps because we were in such obvious roles.

EB: Did you know any other lesbians who had kids?

DL: No. I was very careful to keep Linda separated from my social life, so that we would only invite over trusted friends when Linda was at home. When we had a party, I would arrange for Linda to spend the night with my brother. If anybody ever made remarks about how she was really a cute kid, she'd make a nice little lesbian when she got older, I was just really upset. I guess I was pretty self-hating.

EB: Did she ask questions at all about it, when she got a little older?

DL: Not really, but she used to make remarks that would flip me out. I remember one night Jeanie and I were getting dressed to go out to a dance and she came over and said, "Gee, mommy, you look so handsome"; and then she said to Jeanie something about how she "looked beautiful." I remember being *amused on the one hand and a little unnerved on the other. I'd go to PTA meetings and make efforts to* look as straight as possible. I always felt guilty because I didn't encourage her to bring friends home; but encouraging her to bring friends home meant such a trip for myself in order to play the role that I thought a mother was supposed to play. Because I

didn't have any friends who had children, she didn't really have many kids to play with.

I guess I came out to her when she was 10 or 11. In fact, I just checked it out with her—we were talking about prejudice and I talked about prejudice against lesbians and I said, "You know, Aunt Jeanie and I were more than just friends." (By this time, Jeanie and I had split up.) She said, "Yeah, I knew that." She used to have this timing, of finding a way to quietly walk into the bedroom when we were necking or something like that. That was really difficult because I thought we shouldn't show any affection in front of her.

During that time we made friends with a Black woman named Norma Dee, who lived in our neighborhood. She and her daughter Snooky were involved with a Black lesbian social club. This club used to give these *big* dances up at the Hunts Point Ballroom, so we went up to one of those dances and we made a lot of friends. There were some interracial lesbian couples that we were friends with. I guess all the civil rights stuff was going on in the midst of this but I didn't know shit about any of that; I wasn't political. But that was the most satisfying social life I ever had. One thing I see that's happened in my life, probably because of the erratic kind of childhood I had, was that I had no skills in how to maintain friendships. I sort of bounce along and if people don't continue connections, I lose them. Jeanie played that role.

EB: Making the contacts.

DL: Right. I guess partly that's why I didn't learn how to do it too. I guess that's one of the other injuries of roles. Years later when the white lesbian community got organized and Lesbian Lifespace decided to have the "first ever" lesbian boatride, it just was a laugh to me because I had been on a lesbian boatride organized by Black lesbians *many* years before.

Norma Dee did parties too—it was how you paid the rent if you were short of money; she did sewing and that was sort of erratic. At a pay party you would pay 50 cents to get in, and there might be a coat check for a quarter, and then there'd be fried chicken

dinners, salad, greens and all that for a dollar and then the drinks were 50 cents. I was frequently the bartender at these affairs. Norma Dee and Snooky and Jeanie and I started a social club—we had one big event at our house but it never got off the ground. At these big dances, there weren't all lesbians that came—a lot of family members came. My impression was that the attitude of the Black community toward lesbians was not the hostile thing that I observe now. These were the only women I knew who were out to their families.

EB: And seemed accepted?

DL: Yeah. So the dances consisted of a certain percentage of men, some of them gay and some of them members of the family. There was a great variety of age—young teenage dykes all decked out in the finest threads and 50-year-old dykes who didn't come out too often but would come out for some big thing. Black lesbians had a whole network of things that would go on.

I continued to be friends with Norma Dee, but I don't know what happened to the rest of it—I lost contact. There might have been some other things going on that I wasn't thinking about too consciously, but I know that there was a young white lesbian from the bars who had been up to Harlem who got beaten up and stabbed. Also I played on a softball team called the Amerks that was mostly Black women, and we practiced on Randall's Island and then we used to come over to a bar on 125th St. to get beers after practice; they would not leave me there, they would want to wait until I was ready to leave and see that I got on a train. They were concerned about my physical safety as a white person in Harlem. So those things may, without my being conscious of it, have had their effects. It became easier to go in places where there were mostly white people.

EB: This was the middle or late sixties?

DL: I'm sure that this was when the Black movement began to be militant. But I wasn't on to any of those things.

EB: The movement from a Civil Rights to a Black Power focus?

DL: That's probably what was going on. That just fascinates me—how our choices and what we do is not so clear to us, that we're pushed and channeled in this direction and that without knowing why....

EB: ...and looking back and seeing it in some clearer historical context. When did you start being aware that there was a women's movement?

DL: I didn't discover the women's movement until after I discovered the gay movement. I attended some of the Gay Liberation Front dances and I went to D.O.B. dances and meetings, although I was too drunk most of the time to understand the ideas being discussed. I marched in the second annual Gay Pride March in 1971, and was so drunk I could hardly stand up. I was in the last years of a twenty-year bout with alcoholism.

In early 1972, after a hospitalization and several months of sobriety, I went one Sunday to the GAA Firehouse. I had one or two friends in the Lesbian Liberation Committee of GAA who I had known pre-movement, so I had some sense that I was connected. When I got involved in the movement I was real afraid that I would be attacked by lesbian-feminists for my past role-playing. That was a hard time because I was going through a lot of that alone and in silence. My first thoughts about roles were to recognize that they were exploitative of other women and I should be ashamed of that—and I *was* properly ashamed of that. It was a lot longer before I realized the ways those roles had been oppressive to me. I did very slowly go through a whole process of change. Being around a community of women who felt really good about themselves showed me for the first time that there were all kinds of reasons why I would want to be a woman. These young amazons came along and said, "We're powerful and strong, independent" and all the things I knew I had to be but didn't think I could be as a woman. To some extent, some of the changes in the ways I behaved at first were conforming rather than actual change—conforming so as not to be rejected. One thing that's really amazing to me was to note how very little my clothing habits have changed over all these years and what an education it's been to see that the

change has been other people's heads and the way they perceive me, because *I* have not changed that much but *they* have changed incredibly and I feel that about lesbian-feminists as well as everybody else.

I wonder about the changes, as much as they *seem* so profound, I wonder whether they are. I come in contact with a lot of young lesbian-feminists who are college students or college graduates. But if you go where you find women who don't relate to the movement, things aren't all that different than they used to be. That makes sense. If role-playing, heterosexual role-playing, is taught through propaganda and especially through the family, then the way your family plays its roles can have a lot of effect on how you see yourself, how you behave in your relationships. In my instance, if I had two people to choose to identify with and I wanted to be a survivor, then I would have chosen my father—to survive. I think I must have done that and I'll spend the rest of my life finding all of that and doing something about it where it's not in my interests, or where it's exploitative of somebody else.

EB: To deal with the remnants of that socialization?

DL: Where is the young lesbian supposed to get her notions about what it can be to be a lesbian if she doesn't go to college? And I even worry about the notions that they're getting in college about what it is to be a lesbian. That brings up the whole issue of the feminist closet. It's quite possible these days for mainly middle-class lesbians to have lots of contact with other lesbians, to have a whole social life that's very public and even a political life that's also very public without ever declaring their lesbianism.

EB: You don't see that as possible for working-class lesbians?

DL: I suppose it happens for some working-class lesbians, but I just don't think that the ideas that are generated by the women's movement are getting past the universities. There was a young woman named Sandra who lived here a while ago and she met a young woman who works in a lesbian bar—a Jamaican woman from a fairly poor family, about 18. And Sandra is a young Black woman about 20 from

derstand what the existence or non-existence of Black lesbian writing reveals about the state of Black women's culture and the intensity of *all* Black women's oppression.

The role that criticism plays in making a body of literature recognizable and real hardly needs to be explained here. The necessity for non-hostile and perceptive analysis of works written by persons outside the "mainstream" of white/male cultural rule has been proven by the Black cultural resurgence of the 1960's and '70's and by the even more recent growth of feminist literary scholarship. For books to be real and remembered they have to be talked about. For books to be understood they must be examined in such a way that the basic intentions of the writers are at least considered. Because of racism Black literature has usually been viewed as a discrete subcategory of American literature and there have been Black critics of Black literature who did much to keep it alive long before it caught the attention of whites. Before the advent of specifically feminist criticism in this decade, books by white women, on the other hand, were not clearly perceived as the cultural manifestation of an oppressed people. It took the surfacing of the second wave of the North American feminist movement to expose the fact that these works contain a stunningly accurate record of the impact of patriarchal values and practice upon the lives of women and more significantly that literature by women provides essential insights into female experience.

In speaking about the current situation of Black women writers, it is important to remember that the existence of a feminist movement was an essential pre-condition to the growth of feminist literature, criticism and women's studies, which focused at the beginning almost entirely upon investigations of literature. The fact that a parallel Black feminist movement has been much slower in evolving cannot help but have impact upon the situation of Black women writers and artists and explains in part why during this very same period we have been so ignored.

There is no political movement to give power or support to those who want to examine Black

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an Ivy League college. There was conflict between the two of them, much of it coming out of confusion about what it means to be a lesbian and roles. It's not that Tina isn't smart as a whip because she is—it's just that she's never had any contact with the ideas that Sandra is walking around with without even being conscious of it.

The Gay Pride Marches and going to Washington get reported in the newspapers and the young lesbian maybe feels a little more inclined to go to a bar and not feel the same kind of anxiety and fear. But I'm not so sure that that wasn't the case at other times too. What I'm getting from this history now is that it wasn't in a direct line that things were terrible and they've been gradually improving till the present time. I recently bought a postcard of a transvestite getting out of a police van in 1941—it's just really wonderful, he just has this *big* smile and his drag is not an anti-woman kind of drag; I don't think that that's what he was doing. It was a defiance, an insistence that he was going to be himself and find out who he is by trying out all this stuff. They arrested him, but whatever gave him the courage to do it, the inspiration to do it? Other people were doing it and some of them were getting away with it. Yet I know there were more recent times when that wasn't possible. I think there is this on-again-off-again repression. I have a lot of anxiety that that's going to happen, that we may be in the midst of it right now.

EB: That the repression will increase?

DL: Yes, we don't know our history. I know about the fifties, yet the forties are a total mystery to me. There are women alive who lived in the forties and the thirties and even the twenties who may be right in our midst and we don't find out because we're not valueing this experience enough.*

EB: What kind of feedback have you gotten when you've talked to women who came out after they had become feminists?

DL: Varied. We did a couple of nights of Old Dykes' Tales. I wasn't quite satisfied with how that went—I think it was too big a crowd. But I feel real attracted to the oral tradition of telling stories, there's some-

from ***conditions:6*** 1980

thing very powerful about that. It's taken me a long time to realize that I had some talent that way and that telling a good story is a valuable thing. We were not taught to value it. I remember in my childhood wanting to know anything about the past and my family, and I remember my daughter's interest, too. I feel it's a really important thing, that this whole emphasis on literacy and education—the idea that wisdom is someplace *outside* of our community, in the hands of white, middle-class people—is dangerous. Telling stories about our experiences is our way of demonstrating that wisdom is *in* our community. So I've done these Old Dykes' Tales in that kind of a spirit—I have a fantasy that this is going to happen everywhere.

EB: What kind of a response to your talking about your own experiences have you found from women who in some cases are chronologically younger but came out after the movement, and in other cases are older than you but might have just come out a couple of years ago?

DL: *There are some young women who just relate to this stuff right away—there is something about the adventure, the adventures of being a dyke in the* fifties—amazon tales—that young women are just really turned on by. Clearly it strikes some fantasy in them about living in a time that seemed riskier or doing things that even now most of them won't get to do.

One thing that bothers me a lot is how women will listen to those experiences and then say, "Gee, you really went through a lot! I could never have done all of that and I'm real glad things are like they are today because I would never have been able to deal with all that." It's like somehow we're not making the jump to the realization that it's just another side of the coin.

I did meet a woman who knew that and that was just such an exciting conversation. She's in her late forties or early fifties and she's only come out recently in the last few years. We just got to talking and she wanted to know where I was coming from and I started telling her and she was saying, "Wow, that's amazing! I got married and I was a suburban

housewife and I played babydoll and I played dumb" and so on. And she just *knew* that it was just the other side of the coin. Maybe it has something to do with having enough experience to look at things that way. But that's one of the reasons why I'm finding it hard to share these Old Dykes' Tales, because of people mistaking it for something else, not being able to use it.

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*See recent interviews with Mabel Hampton in Feminary, Vol. X, No. 2 (1979), pp. 7–16 and Sinister Wisdom, Vol. 10 (Summer 1979), pp. 19–24; Judith Schwarz's forthcoming Close Friends and Devoted Companions: A History of Lesbian Relationships in America and the Selected Bibliography in Lisa Duggan's "Lesbianism and American History: A Brief Source Review" in Frontiers, Vol. IV, No. 3 (Fall 1979), pp. 80–85. E.B.

from **conditions:6** 1980

SEPTEMBER MOON

Joy Harjo

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.

from ***conditions:7*** 1981

A RITUAL PROCESSION
Cherry Muhanji

The Big Mama Stories, Shay Youngblood, Firebrand Books, Ithaca, NY, 1989, 106 pages, $8.95.

Its an honorable journey back to Shay Youngblood's "circle of women" (p.101). Big Mama, Miss Rosa, Miss Tom, Miss Vi and Miss Lamama come alive, and some are very very humorous!

> And late as always come Miss Lamama. Her real name was Jessie Pearl Lumumba. At seventeen she married a African and took to wearing African dresses and took on African-like ways. (p.14)

Miss Lamama's name is a play on Lumumba (the assassinated Congolese leader) and is a very funny character. Yet some of the pieces in this work are tragic even as they are being created out of that special place that only children know. And, too, these are no-nonsense women without the serious drama that we experienced in Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place*. As soon as I figured out these pieces were freed from the proper posture of serious adult tragedies I jumped into my Raggedy Ann clothes painted big red circles on my cheeks grabbed my Wonder Woman comic books and my de-coder ring and zip...I was back in Black Bottom near the Brewster projects in my own Dee-troit city!

Situated in the South Youngblood's trek back to the ole neighborhood was artful—a blended, sometimes uneven weave but she manages to hold the direction and in the doing reveals a strong oral sense, a talent for writing stories as if they were being *told*. How many of us had aunts as well as uncles, cousins, and Mamas—blood or not—who could really tell a good story each with their own styles and distinct flairs? I had an Aunt Carlise who slapped her thigh with one hand while sipping white lightning from a Mason fruit jar with the other, as she connected us with Brer Rabbit and Big John outfoxin' ole massah every time.

Shay Youngblood's respect for the folk voice is

LESBIANS IN AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURES

Paula Gunn Allen

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 sys-

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tems 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 predated 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

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Governor and his wife are taught a lesson that they would no doubt deny. But those of us from the ole neighborhoods know better.

> "...just when she thought she couldn't take no more heavenly sounds I led the choir in 'Silent Night.' When I was done there was a deep hush quiet like even God had stopped what She [is this Youngblood's politics coming through?] was doing to listen." (p.55)

The Governor made his mistake when he didn't hear "God in my song" (p.56).

> *"Nobody know how the master get sick. Nobody know how he die. The doctors won't know why he pain so in his stomach. The grind be so fine. He think it be root work and be scared of niggers from then on."* (58–59)

When there is a call to return to the ole neighborhood there is always some people you remember better than others. For me there was Crazy Lady Russell who collected only coke bottles and Miss Ruby who could really pick a good guitar. Youngblood's tales are no exception. The "Funny Women" is the piece I most remember. It is a strange and magical tale from the first line, "Miss Tom was not a pretty woman, she was handsome like a man" (p.67), to the last line.

> Miss Lily eventually got over her fever and continued to heal coloreds in the community. She and Miss Tom probably still live in that big, old white house on Sixth Avenue, loving each other with they eyes wide open. (p.78)

And all the lines in between. This one is well worth the price of the book. There are familiar boundaries this story dares to blur. Yes, I came away from this piece marveling at the daring of this young and gifted storyteller.

If you know the stuff Black communities are made of then this book is like talking to a home girl. Fat Daddy's Rib Shack, Miss Corine's Beauty Shop and Pitts (a funeral home) next door. Yes, Youngblood is really funny. There is Sulphur 8 hair grease and Bruton's Sweet Snuff. Remember Butter Cup snuff

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 pri-

mary 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

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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.

women's experience through studying our history, literature and culture. There is no political presence that demands a minimal level of consciousness and respect from those who write or talk about our lives. Finally, there is not a developed body of Black feminist political theory whose assumptions could be used in the study of Black women's art. When Black women's books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. When white women look at Black women's works they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics. A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean. The citations from a variety of critics which follow prove that without a Black feminist critical perspective not only are books by Black women misunderstood, they are destroyed in the process.

Jerry H. Bryant, *The Nation's* white male reviewer of Alice Walker's *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, wrote in 1973:

> The subtitle of the collection, "Stories of Black Women," is probably an attempt by the publisher to exploit not only black subjects but feminine ones. There is nothing feminist about these stories, however.[2]

Blackness and feminism are to his mind mutually exclusive and peripheral to the act of writing fiction. Bryant of course does not consider that Walker might have titled the work herself, nor did he apparently read the book which unequivocally reveals the author's feminist consciousness.

In *The Negro Novel in America*, a book that Black critics recognize as one of the worst examples of white racist pseudo-scholarship, Robert Bone cavalierly dismisses Ann Petry's classic, *The Street*. He perceives it to be "...a superficial social analysis" of how slums victimize their Black inhabitants.[3] He further objects that:

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 constraint 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

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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 Lesbians 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 marshals 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

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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'tsi'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,

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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 men's 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.

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ISSN: 0147-8311