

# Onyx

BLACK LESBIAN NEWSLETTER





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## Submissions

ONYX is now a bimonthly publication  
(When submitting, please send written  
work typed double-spaced if possible)

The deadlines for the next two issues  
are March 5th for the April issue and  
May 7th for the June issue.

Give us a call if you have an idea that  
you want to talk about.

## EDITORIAL: ONYX

We are proud to announce the results of  
our search to find an appropriate  
name for the Black Lesbian Newsletter.  
Many of you have expressed the desire to  
have our name reflect the multifarious  
and multidimensional aspects of the  
black lesbian community.

We are ONYX...a beautifully layered  
and multicolored precious stone. We are  
one of the oldest and darkest gems found  
in the world. We are ONYX...an elegant  
crystal, a treasure on earth, a thing to  
be desired. We, as ONYX, will strive to  
maintain the strength of the stone, the  
beauty of the gem, and the determination  
of this crystal. This will be reflected  
in our future issues of ONYX.

Thank you  
ONYX

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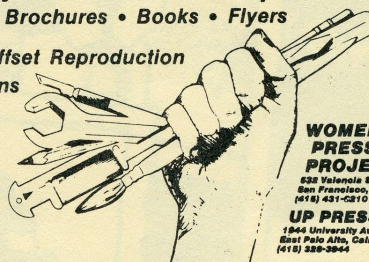
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### ACT MORE LIKE A HUMAN BEING

This afternoon--I woke up, wanting you  
 You were gone  
 Wanting to hold what you freely give me  
 Needing to know that you were mine and I  
 yours

You were gone  
 Emptiness shook my body  
 Coldness held me very tight  
 Your departure told me, something is  
 vacant

in you for me.  
 I hurt when I woke up this afternoon  
 Just your words ringing in my ear.  
 More like a human being--since when did  
 we adopt phrases and drop discus-  
 sions

Why I'm hurting--I don't really know  
 You left me before I slept and you were  
 gone  
 Still when I woke.

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### SISTER, MY HEART CRIES

Sister, my heart cries...  
 when we pass on the street and don't  
 see each other. You say it's be-  
 cause of the "brother"

Sister, my heart cries...  
 that we can't communicate and edu-  
 cate ourselves and the community ab-  
 out our varied cultures.

Sister, my heart cries...  
 when we see each other at mostly  
 white events and don't let our eyes  
 meet, when I sit down next to you,  
 and you move to another seat.

Sister, my heart cries...  
 when you say you can't talk to me,  
 yet you can talk to other wimmin  
 about me.

Sister, my heart cries...  
 to know that we've learned our les-  
 sons well from the white man--to  
 distrust and despise. My black,  
 red, yellow and brown sisters we  
 must unite.

Sister, my heart cries...  
 we need each other to survive!

© 1981 Windy Sky

### UNTITLED

I listen to soft music, on my stereo  
 Different forms of love strokes.  
 The candle placed purposely in the cof-  
 fee table's center jumps at me.  
 Flames shoot and flicker towards the  
 room. No lights sooth my tired eyes,  
 Resting my lead-filled neck and should-  
 ers, I sigh.

Melodies from Quincy Jones' music bounce  
 their way thru my head

Images of animated notes stepping in  
 rhythmic strokes.

The music lifts me and takes me into its  
 bowels

I don't want to escape.

This space knows no fear or pain, just  
 energy

Synchronizing my body's energy to Quin-  
 cy's music, I enjoy.

Sadness falls over me, sucks me into its  
 breast

As the melody changes its pace to pain  
 Again my thoughts anchor themselves in  
 our sea

The waves fight each other to brush and  
 bump our sky

I ache, my insides are swollen with pain  
 love me, as rocky as our sea is, just  
 love me

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# BOOK REVIEW: NTOZAKE SHANGE'S SASSAFRASS, CYPRESS & INDIGO

The temptation to confuse, or at least identify certain artists with their creations is hard to resist. It's that way with poet and playwright Ntozake Shange. If the women in her poems, plays, stories, and, most recently, her novel, Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo, (St. Martin's Press, 1982; \$10.95), are not parts of Shange herself, they sure pull their clothes from the same closet, cook from the same pots and hum the same tunes, the blues and the Art Ensemble of Chicago blowing much of the air around them.

Author of three plays\* and an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children, Shange is best known for her choreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf, a celebration and tribute to being black and woman in America. for colored girls was first performed in 1974 at the now defunct Bacchanal, a women's bar in Berkeley. And Shange has always given the Bay Area women's community credit for much of the support and encouragement she received in those early days of her career. So when she returns here, it is something of a homecoming.

Sashaying into town with Shange this last time, the end of September, were Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo, three more coloured girls, this time, sisters hailing from Charleston, South Carolina. As in her poetry, Shange's first novel evokes smells, textures, sounds and pictures of blackness, of woman, of magic. And like magic, all is not predictable and the world may appear not as it seems. This is not a novel in the conventional sense. Shange maintains the book's strongest narrative line, and creates the most vivid characters, in the first section, the story of Indigo, youngest of the three sisters. Indigo is yet a child, though in the course of her story she becomes a woman. Indigo hears her dolls speak. Indigo sees the world as it might have been. Indigo walks through that world with all the sureness and delight of one who refuses to be less than herself.

"She made herself, her world, from all that she came from. She looked around her at the wharf. If there was nobody there but white folks, she made them black folks. In the grocery, if one white folks were buying up all the fresh collards and okra, she made



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them disappear and put the produce on the vegetable wagons that went round to the Colored. There wasn't enough for Indigo in the world she'd been born to, so she made up what she needed. What she thought the black people needed."

p. 4

While Sassafrass, eldest, and Cypress, middle sister, sit at the looms of their weaver mother, Hilda Effania, while the three older women throw shuttles and spin yarn and stir vats of dye, Indigo is sent off to her dolls. No one else has time to talk to her, or to listen. So we follow Indigo on her adventures around black Charleston. She plays her violin, banned from Hilda's house and ears, in Sister Mary Louise's gardening shed. We go to the drugstore with Indigo when she buys her first box of sanitary napkins. Once home, we watch her fashion more elegant ones for her dolls from her Mama's best velvet and argue for Hilda Effania's best china to be set for a feast of celebration.

Child becoming woman, Indigo feels her power and shows little fear in using it. Her two elder sisters come across as less clearly formed, each more moved than moving: events happen to Sassafrass and Cypress. And it is their stories which lack the strong center, the solid confidence that mark Indigo's. Indigo is Indigo, whether she is puzzling over the mysteries of love between Sister Mary Louise and Uncle John Henderson or establishing her right to join the Junior Geechee Capitans, until Indigo's appearance, its membership reserved exclusively for boys. One wonders if Sassafrass and Cypress, older but seemingly less wise than their baby sister, lost their power, their sense of who they are, because they expected to lose it once men entered their lives, because it is around men that both sisters display confusion, aimlessness and ambivalence.

For a time, Cypress finds love and comfort in the arms of a woman. But she soon drifts back to men, why is not clear. Sassafrass plays yo-yo with her lover Mitch, leaving him, returning, leaving. We have no idea why.

Shange weaves words with the sure touch of a gifted poet, but here she gives her characters too little support to withstand the expectations of motivation, growth and progression demanded of the traditional novel form. We understand why Indigo writes spells and talks to her dolls. Indigo's world is shown to us through Indigo herself, not by Shange as Indigo's creator. In comparison, Sassafrass and Cypress' worlds seem more collections of details, poetic and evocative though they are, rather

er than fully developed worlds in which the women actually live. A dancer, Cypress executes a plié, jeté and a tendu across the pages but rarely does her self as dancer rise from the paper. The kinesthetic sense of a body moving through space cannot speak through a calculated recitation of ballet terms. Sassafrass, poet and writer, keeps her hands busy with cloth, thread, skeins of wool. She sews Mitch's shirts, she crochets him caps. And when the terrors of making words, of actually writing, become overwhelming, she cooks for him.

"And Sassafrass couldn't avoid the truth: the man she loved was not happy with her charade of homebodiness, because all this weaving and crocheting and macrameing she'd been doing all her life, and Sassafrass was supposed to be a writer." p. 79

We are presented with this irony of Mitch, the man for whom Sassafrass gives up her own power, forcing her to look at what she's doing but never discover why or how she came to do it.

It's not that we never catch glimpses of the full, rounded women who are Cypress and Sassafrass. Coerced into listening to one of Mitch's friends recite a piece of black woman-hating trash masquerading as a love song to Black Womanhood, Sassafrass takes care of business in no uncertain terms. And on late nights, in Cypress' house in San Francisco, the two sisters talk, eat, giggle and share their strength. We see too little of those sisters.

If Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo spins a thin novelistic thread, it creates a beautifully strong poetic patchwork. In the letters Hilda Effania writes to her daughters, in the spats between the sisters, on a Christmas Day when all the women of this black family are together, we recognize and love so much of who we are as black women. And we look to baby sister Indigo who knows it all and shares it.

"Where there is a woman there is magic. If there is a moon falling from her mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic, who can share or not share her powers. A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of the spirits." p. 3

\*Ntozake Shange's three plays are "Spell No. 7"; "A Photograph: Lovers in Motion" and "Boogie Woogie Landscapes". They are all contained in her book Three Plays, also published by St. Martin's Press and available at local public libraries.



# Announcements

## February 15, 22 & March 1

Workshops in Basic Music Arrangement given by Mary Watkins. For further information: 644-1896

## Wednesdays

Women of Color Health Clinic in South Berkeley - for information call 843-6194

Bay Area Black Lesbians and Gay Men meet once each month. For info call Marlene 540-0671

## Midgett's Place

### February 11

Marge Green, nurse, describing her own personal experience "coming out after 40."

## Fridays

Lesbians meeting lesbians - chemical-free, refreshments, dancing, entertainment - 864-0876

A Support Group for Lesbian Mothers of Color will meet monthly. If interested contact: Marge - 782-3054, Windy - 532-1628 or Midgett - 864-0876

## SPECIAL THANKS

Special thanks to all the women who graciously helped us with the New Year's Party, and to all the women who supported us by their attendance.

## ATTENTION ARTISTS/PHOTOGRAPHERS:

ONYX needs your black and white artwork and photographs. Call and leave a message for Marlene or Sarita at 540-0671.

## Deadlines for Announcements

Mar. 12 for Apr. issue  
(415) 540-0671

## MISCELLANEOUS

Visit the West Coast Lesbian Collections, Sundays noon to 4 and Wednesdays 6 to 9 - Call us at 465-8080, or write P.O. Box 23753 Oakland, CA 94623

## SERVICES

Housecleaning, reasonable rates - Ann 547-0158

## NOTICES

Third World Women invited to join lesbian/gay/bisexual/tv-ts peer counselor training program. Begins Feb. 5, 1983 for 12 weeks, no fee. Pacific Center, 2712 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley, CA. Call Evie Hoch or Allen Rockway, 548-8283.

## PERSONALS

Lesbians Introduction - call Midgett 864-0876.

## CONFERENCE: THE FUTURE OF WOMEN IN THE TRADES

On May 28-30, the San Francisco/Bay Area chapter of Tradeswomen, Inc. will host the first National Tradeswomen Conference. It is of paramount importance that this conference include the ideas, energy, and spirit of women of color who must often struggle against greater odds to achieve full participation and advancement in the trades... If you are concerned about racism and sexism, and issues unique to women of color, then there is still time to lend your support to help make this a worthwhile event. Tradeswomen, Inc. is presently looking for women who can offer their assistance in any of the following areas: organizing and/or leading workshops, ideas on new workshops, publicity, mailing, the planning committee, transportation, and housing. For further information, please contact: Naomi Friedman (415) 482-5183 or Dorian Morena (415) 834-3268 (women of color). Or write: Tradeswomen, Inc. P.O. Box 40664, San Francisco, CA 94140.

## *Donations*

We now have non-profit status through the sponsorship of the San Francisco Women's Centers. Therefore all donations are tax deductible. Checks should be made out to the San Francisco Women's Centers/Black Lesbian Newsletter in order to benefit from this status.

## *Classified Ads*

### Deadlines for Classified Ads

Mar. 12 for Apr. issue  
(415) 540-0671

## WANTED

"Honey you ought to write that story down!" We want to print your stories, poems, interviews, etc., in the new book ORDINARY WOMEN/EXTRAORDINARY LIVES. Write or call for info: Paula Ross, c/o 1312 Addison St., Berkeley, CA 94702 (415) 848-4850

## ARTICLES FOR SALE

The Laughing Goddess Grotto, 4118 Telegraph Ave. Oakland 653-4169 - candles, oils, incenses, gifts, books, asungi cards - art gallery. 4pm-9pm.



## BLACK HISTORY MONTH

As black women, the month of February means more to us than the hearts and flowers of Valentine's Day. February is Black History Month, a celebration of the accomplishments of black people and a time to look at where we are, where we need to be and how to get there. Introduced in 1926 as Negro History Week by black historian Dr. Carter G. Woodson, Black History Month includes the birthday of Frederick Douglass (14 February 1817) and the day of Malcolm X's death (21 February 1965).

As black lesbians, Black History Month means searching out the lives of our sisters who came before us, lives that are too often buried, or worse, totally ignored and dismissed by the straight community. It is vital to our survival and sense of who we are, as women, as black women, as lesbians, to know our history. Over the last 15 years, there has been an increase in the availability of resource material about women and about blacks, thanks to the second wave of feminism and the civil rights and black liberation struggles of the 60's and 70's. Information about black and other non-white lesbians still remains difficult to uncover. There is growing evidence, however, that a number of black women, well-known and ordinary, were "in the life" and left clues behind them which we can use today in our efforts to discover images of ourselves.

Some of the most recently published good books about black women in general and black lesbians in particular are:

Black Lesbians, an Annotated Bibliography compiled by J.R. Roberts (\$5.95 paper; The Naiad Press, 1981).

All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave, Black Women's Studies. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith, editors. (\$8.95 paper; The Feminist Press, 1982).

Sturdy Black Bridges, Visions of Black Women in Literature. Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, editors. (\$5.95 paper; Anchor Press, 1979).

All of these books can be found at a few local bookshops, though one shop may not carry every title. In the East Bay, try A Woman's Place, 4015 Broadway, Oakland; T'Olodumare Bookstore, 4834 Telegraph Ave., Oakland (specializes in African works but the owner's eclectic tastes--he's an African man--include books on American feminism and black women); The Old Mole, 1942 University Ave., Berkeley. In San Francisco, there is Old Wives Tales, 1009 Valencia and Modern Times, 968 Valencia. Instead of flowers or candy for a lover or friend this Valentine's Day, give a piece of black women's history.

LORRAINE HANSBERRY (19 May 1930- 12 January 1965)

Black playwright Lorraine Hansberry is best known for A Raisin in the Sun, first produced on Broadway in 1959. What is less well-known is that Hansberry, a vocal supporter of civil rights, was also, more than likely, a lesbian. In 1957, Hansberry wrote several letters to the lesbian publication THE LADDER. In them, she talked about the economic and social pressures that often drove consciously lesbian women into marriage. This was perhaps a comment on her own choices. She also pointed out the links between anti-homosexuality and anti-feminism and called for a new feminist ethic.

That Hansberry risked her literary career to speak out on the plight of lesbians and gay men is a strong indication that she was moved by some powerful inner impulse as well as a more broadly based sense of justice. Read more about her in Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A. Jonathan Katz, editor, p. 425, (public libraries should have it) and in a Special Issue of FREE-DOMWAYS, "Lorraine Hansberry: Art of Thunder, Vision of Light", volume 19, No. 4, 1979 (bookshops).

Have a productive and stimulating Black History Month!

© 1983 Paula Ross

## FOLLOW UP--OROVILLE: MARCH AGAINST ATTACKS ON OURSELVES AND OUR CHILDREN

On December 11, 1982, the Concerned Parents of South Oroville staged a march to demonstrate and protest the racism, lack of employment opportunities, and low low-grade education that threatens the survival of their community. Members of the ONYX staff joined more than 1500 people who marched and rallied, in a united effort, in order to revive the spirit and determination necessary to combat the sickness and evil of racism and oppression.

We, as black lesbians find it imperative that we continue to support efforts to protect our communities against physical and/or mental destruction. We have a stake in the future of black people all over this country who once again find ourselves up against brutal attempts to force us back into second-class citizenship.

## OLLIE'S UPDATE:

As of this writing, all of our demands (see Dec. issue) have not been met. We are asking women to use their own discretion in dealing with this serious matter. No longer will mistreatment of women of color be tolerated.



## JUST WANNA BE SEEN AS SANE

A few weeks ago, in the ONYX (BLN), there appeared an article by Joyce Pen-alver. She told about her "coming out" along with it's difficulties and joys. I enjoyed her writing very much and I respect her also.

All Gay people have experienced some form of oppression related to being gay. Homophobia and other social oppression makes coming out a very difficult thing to do and it makes being proud to be a lesbian just as hard. Many of us choose to be quiet in our own oppression.

I personally have not come that far in being vocal when some derogatory statement is made about gays. But at least I will say something. For instance, during the holidays a friend of my father's told me, "You better watch out for those gays in San Francisco, they'll get you." I told him simply, "I don't have to, I'm not the least bit afraid." For me to have said just that little bit a year ago might have been impossible. But time passes and I feel more sure of my-

self; I love me and I'm proud of who I am, I cannot be ashamed. I know I face discrimination from those I love, but I want friends and family to truly love me for who I am. (To thine ownself be true.)

Persecution will always show its ugly face. If I'm not persecuted for being a lesbian, I will be persecuted for being black, a woman, for eating chocolate, for wearing glasses, for wearing white socks, for liking Japanese-made calculators (the list goes on).

It's hard to stand up and be recognized. But we can do simple things to support ourselves. We can write letters in support of gay lifestyles to newspapers, television networks, congressmen and other legislators. You don't even have to sign your real name.

Writing letters in protest of our oppression is the easiest way to support our liberation.

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## In Celebration of Black History Month

Whenever black women took pen in hand they did so with a sense of allegiance to and involvement in a great moral quest. Black women's earliest writings were impelled by social, political, and moral causes that were life and death issues for black people.

One of the results of this identification with great moral and social issues is a sense of personal autonomy that many of these women laid claim to.

My second hunch about the black woman's struggle for a literary voice is that it is often achieved under the influence of a nurturing female community or because of a female precursor who conveys to the writer the power and authority to speak.

If there is any single distinguishing characteristic of the literature of black women writers, it is this powerful identification with a female kinship network which transmits its own authority.

Mary Helen Washington, in *Radical Teacher*, No. 17

## and Black Women Writers

Telephone or inquire at  
desk for February events  
featuring black women

Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me— so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her. And in that growing, we came to separation, that place where work begins. Another meeting.

Their names, selves, faces feed me like corn before labor. I live each of them as a piece of me, and I choose these words with the same grave concern with which I choose to push speech into poetry, the mattering core, the forward visions of all our lives.

Once home was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother's mouth. I only discovered its latitudes when Carriacou was no longer my home.

There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood.

Audre Lord, in *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*

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