



Print is Our Medium

The text of a speech delivered before the 3rd Annual
Lesbian Writers Conference Chicago, September 17, 1976

Beth Hodges

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Beth Hodges is an academic, teacher and editor as well as a reader, observer, lover and critic of women's literature. She edited the Lesbian Feminist Writing & Publishing issue of *Margins*; a review of little mags and small press books in 1975, and the *Sinister Wisdom* Special Issue on Lesbian Writing and Publishing in 1976. Both collections are still available from the publishers (or write: Women in Distribution, P.O. Box 8858, Washington D.C. 20003).

Ms. Hodges was introduced to conference participants by Barbara Grier (aka Gene Damon) principal compiler of *The Lesbian in Literature, 2nd Edition* and for several years editor of *The Ladder* the first, (and for many years, the only) lesbian feminist magazine in this country. Ms. Grier is now the moving force behind Naiad Press, the third largest lesbian publishing house in the U.S.

Each of us here is in a love relationship with lesbian literature. We are writers, editors, publishers, critics, presswomen. Our activity attests to our love.

Barbara Grier's love affair with lesbian literature began thirty years ago; mine, two years ago. Am I presumptuous, then, to speak to you? When two and a half years ago I never even suspected the existence of an amazon culture? NO! True, I can't make speeches on "the lesbian contribution to world literature." But also true - if I could, I would not. What we have done for writing is not the essential. What our writing has done for us, is. I know what our writing has done. You do too. Because I value the effect of our writing, I urge you to continue.

First, I have to talk about the words we don't have. We are doing something we can't name. The language we use says, "print", "writing", "literature". I'm talking about nothing material: not about books or marks on paper. Neither am I talking about the the physical act of writing. I'm meaning the dynamic -- sister addressing sister. By "writing" I mean the political act which is a woman speaking to her sisters through the medium of print. Some of us are "speaking to our sisters" by operating presses, or editing, or publishing others' works. I will make a case for what I call writing, but understand always that I mean "participating in the communicating between women through the medium of print".

Why do I tell you to write? I have two stories --maybe they aren't stories--two moments then, to relate. I experienced one; I observed the other. The one I know was a direct result of writing (sister addressing sister). The other I believe to be the effect of many sisters addressing sisters - for however many years we have dared.

1.

The first story is mine. The year is 1974. When 1974 began I had bought a house in western Kansas, expecting, I guess, to live happily-ever-after in my little tenured position in my little white frame with my little poet-friend, Claudia. Each of us was the only other lesbian the other knew in western Kansas--and maybe in the world. I'd heard of Kate Millet and Gay Pride and I'd read *The Well of Lonliness* (which the college library keeps in a locked collection). I had not a milligram of feminist consciousness.

At the end of that year, November, there was a conference in New York City. I gave a speech. The student who had typed my speech had asked me to tape the conference. So when I got back to Hays, I gave Linda the tapes. Linda listened, and she was amazed. How could NYC dykes have the same thoughts that I had in the wheatfields of western Kansas? How could I, a thousand miles from the city, have tapped into the spirit of the conference?

When I went to NYC I had never attended a women's concert, had never been to a conference, had never heard a lecture, had never met a feminist in person. What had happened to that woman? who in January was a queen bee? and who, in June, first heard the name and guessed that Rita Mae Brown was a suffragette? How could she, in isolation in western Kansas, have developed a consciousness which she discovered she shared with women she'd never met? a consciousness which led her to the same discoveries, the same affirmations the other speakers made.

Of course the story is not as simple as I tell it. There are threads (how does a bee who has never heard of Rita Mae Brown get to NYC in the first place?) and there are contributing factors (the b bee's having tried to teach stories by women, and the lover's leaving). But told simply--what happened is this: between June, when Claudia told

2.

me she admired Rita Mae Brown (Claudia had moved to California so she *knew* who Rita Mae Brown was) and November when I spoke in NYC--*I was born!*

My sisters had written--article, journals, books, letters. Not one of them had me in mind when she wrote. But I was born. And my sisters' writing mothered my birth.

This is why I ask you to write.

This is why I honor writing, why I say that print is our most important medium. How else could you have found your way to me, in the wheatfields of western Kansas? I didn't discover you in their newspapers, or on their radio or their television. No concert ever came to western Kansas and no conference either. No feminist ever came, to talk either publicly or privately.

What medium could travel so far as to reach even Kansas? And what other medium could effect as much, once it arrived?

My story may not be unique. And the titles may be irrelevant. (I may also be embarrassed that women's presses don't appear in this part of my story.) But my mothers are not nameless women.

Once I learned that there were women who had written for me--though they didn't know they were writing for me--I read everything I could get my hands on. Four of the works I read between June and November may have been the greatest forces in my coming-to-life. The first was *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman* which Claudia brought back with her from San Francisco in June; *Sappho* gave me the vision. The second of the writings were two unpublished papers by Julia P. Stanley; these gave me the rage. The third work was Davis's *The First Sex*; it gave me the assurance. The fourth work was Jill Johnston's *Lesbian Nation*; Jill was

my mother.

The second story is all of ours. The time is June of this year, 1976. For a full twelve months I'd been traveling between New England, New York City and the South, meeting women, talking, reading, editing, speaking. All of a sudden, in late May-early June, I was struck that women--poets, witches, theatre directors, linguists, theologians--were making the same discoveries. In Boston I heard Z Budapest say something that I heard Catherine Nicholson say in North Carolina that I read in the Manuscript of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*. Mary Daly in Boston observed in a speech something Rosemary Daniell in Atlanta observed in a poem. I was struck by the convergence in women's thinking, amazed that women, at great distances from each other, independent of each other, were making the same discoveries. I told my mother in Atlanta what I had observed. My mother said, "Maybe these ideas are just in the air."

I bless my mother for her explanation. Had she not offered an explanation, I would not have disagreed. And this evening I would not be making a care for print.

No, I don't believe in "ideas in the air." (There was nothing in Kansas air but dust). How *could* women be making discoveries simultaneously? It must be that we share a knowledge. If we live at great remove from each other, what can we know in common? I would guess that we know the ideas of our writers, whether we read the books ourselves or whether the ideas of our writers, whether we read the books ourselves or whether the ideas come through other books or through an oral medium.

I think that simultaneous discovery is neither mystical nor even mysterious.

My experience (of going to New York City in 1974 and giving a speech which jibed with the other speeches of the conference has an explanation. I believe that the same explanation holds for what I noticed in late May and early June. When I wrote reviewers for the *Sinister Wisdom* issue, I told them about the incidents of simultaneous discovery and said further:

I assume that these occurrences are not isolated events but are evidence of a woman-identified sensibility and that the existence of a woman-identified sensibility is the result of our sharing a common heritage, a heritage given us--through words--by our artist-thinkers, our true mothers.

If it is true that the publisher and the critic and the editor and the presswoman and the writer are the creators and nurturers of our woman-identified sensibility, then we have a terrific responsibility--and a wonderful privilege.

By now some of you may be saying, "Oh, sure, a few things have changed, will change perhaps, because some women have written, but nothing I'm doing will make a difference."

OH YES IT WILL. The very act of addressing ourselves to women is revolutionary. The revolution is not what we say when we speak together; the revolution is our speaking-together. In 1976, speaking to women might just be the ultimate political action.

There is still another difference you are making. And this one may be finally the only one that matters--the difference it makes to you.

Once I was optimistic and wonderfully self-conscious. I felt that we were blessed to have been born at this moment when, for the first

time, women had an awareness that we were changing the world. The idea of the Lesbian Herstory Archives contributed to my sense of self, and I was excited that the archives would tell our spiritual daughters who we were. Other women shared similar fantasies--that our nieces would write our biographies, the stories of our circle of friends.

These were the fantasies of my infancy. This was before I knew about our being "plowed under" (Jan Clausen's term). Then I didn't know that women had written the English novel from 1760 to 1810 and were plowed under so thoroughly no one thought to question that gap in literary history. Neither did I know then what had happened to the 19th century feminists.

Being "plowed under" was only one of the horrors I became aware of. I discovered there are more immediate dangers, from without and from within the movement. And I threatened to become a casualty myself.

I was not optimistic then, this spring when I sat in the grass with a movement leader in Boston. We talked about repression, about phone taps, surveillance, grand juries, about our fear of even greater repression under a new administration. I told her of my recurring obsession--how fragile we are--the fear that we might disappear and, with us, every trace of what we knew. We could be erased so easily--our lives, our art, our herstory. I asked, "How can what we do make any difference?" And my friend said, "I know I have made a difference. And if it all disappears. If one hundred years from now they find one copy of *Sisterhood is Powerful*, for example. And if no one can decipher the book, I've still made a difference. I I have made a difference to myself."

So I urge you to write, friends. Write for the

sake of the woman I was before I heard your voices, for the nameless woman who doesn't know community even now. Write for the sake of our woman-identified sensibility, that it be nourished and strengthened. And if for no other reason, write for your own sake, for the difference your writing makes to you.

Write for the sake of all of us.

"(Art) can create the rage, the longing; the joy, the courage, the consciousness to make real revolution, for poetry *is* a dangerous force; it can move mountains."

--Robin Morgan
(interview in *The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook*.)

"For many of us, the women's presses have literally made possible our art, our movement, our lives."

--Jan Clausen
("The Politics of Publishing and the Lesbian Community," *SINISTER WISDOM*, November, 1976)

So I write this polemic I
call a poem, say "Write poems, Women."/ I want to
read them. I have seen you watching, holding on/
and watching, but
I see your lips moving. You have stories to/
tell, strong stories;
I want to hear your minds as well as/
hold your hands.

--Honor Moore
("Polemic #1")

"Print is our medium."

--Beth Hodges

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