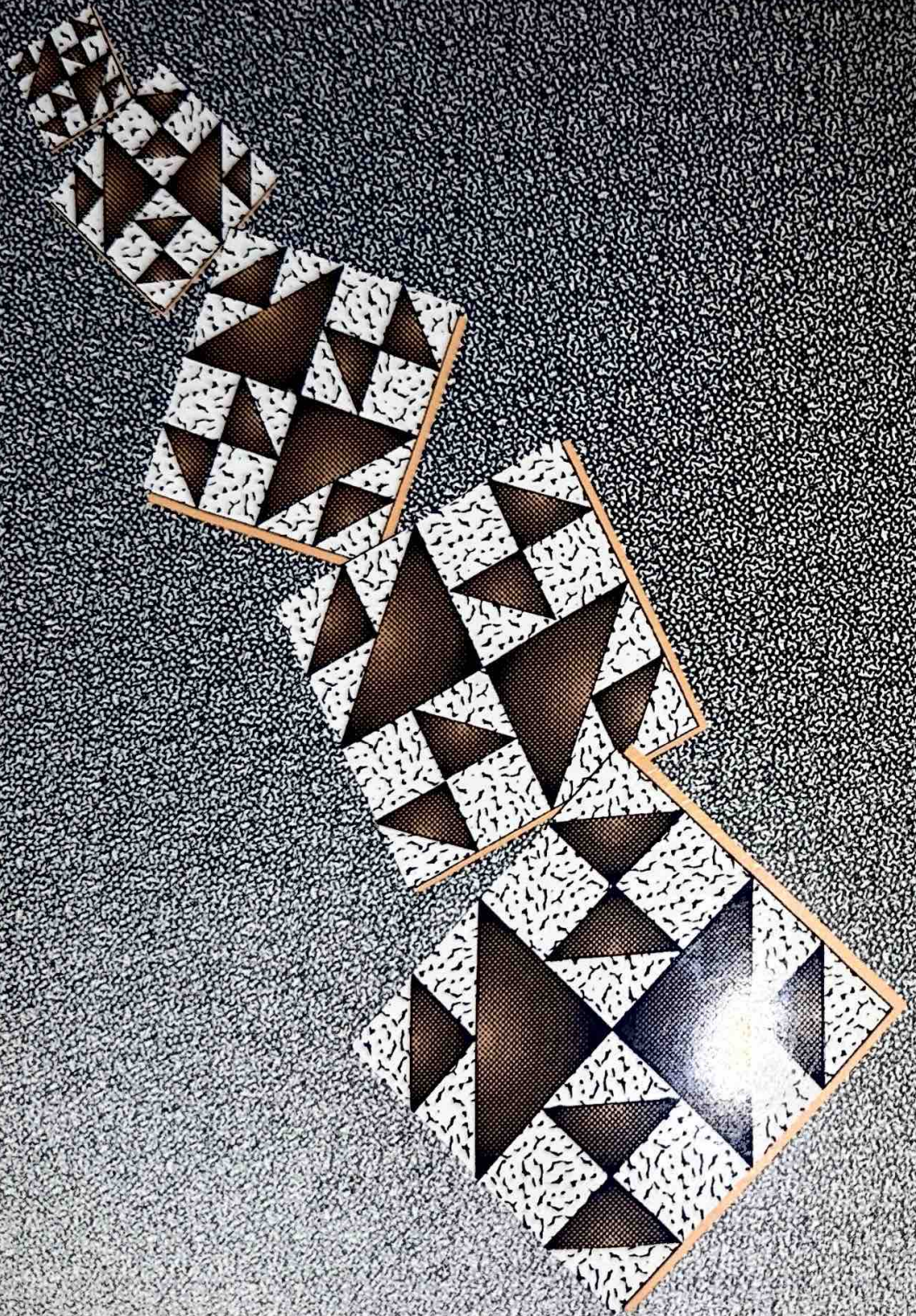


# Lesbian Ethics



Volume 4 No. 2

*Lesbian Ethics*

Editor: Jeanette Silveira

Individual subscriptions: \$14 for 3 issues, \$16 international surface,  
\$24 international air.

Institutions: \$18/\$20/\$28.

Sample copy: \$6

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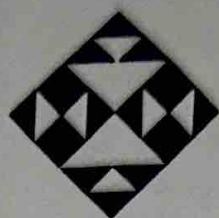
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**This is for JMax. . . .**



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# *Lesbian Ethics*

Volume 4, No. 2

Spring 1991

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## Editor's Introduction

As many of you know, JMax, who was the coordinating guest editor for this issue on class, and my companion and lover, committed suicide in November. I had hoped to be able to but now find I cannot yet write much about her life and death. I'm grateful to Lee Evans for her piece in this issue which says some of what I couldn't. I've gotten many cards and letters and calls from lesbians everywhere. I have been able to answer only a very few, but all of them have been crucial to me, and I want you to know how thankful I am for all of you. A sense of connectedness to other dykes is by far the most important part of what keeps me standing. I now know that when I hear of another lesbian in tragedy, I will write her.

The two other guest editors, Shoney and Lee Evans, felt they could not continue with the editing after JMax's death. Lee's paper in this issue describes her reasons. I had thought of writing a paper on class for this issue also, musings on class by a middle-class dyke primarily for middle-class dykes, musings and insights most often inspired by JMax herself, but at the moment these seem insignificant. Some editing had occurred before her suicide, but otherwise the issue of *LE* before you contains most of the material we received edited minimally by me. It is far from perfect, many more dykes need to be heard from, but it is, I believe, substantial.

Class will be an ongoing concern of *LE's*. I will find someone to take over JMax's column on class. If you have responses or additions to the discussion in this issue, please send them. You can also send them to *Sinister Wisdom*, which is doing an issue on class, their deadline is June 1, 91.

Class is about life and death. A couple of weeks before her death, JMax asked Bridget Collins to write a paper for this issue, after seeing a short piece of Bridget's in the National Lesbian Conference newsletter. Only a few weeks after JMax's death Bridget's paper arrived, and I read, "The average age of mortality for women of poverty is between 47 and 52 years old." She didn't miss by much.

I wake as if from a dream, amazed. In my community in the last year alone I know personally three lesbians who have been pushed to the edge of survival by catastrophic illness in combination with their previous meagre resources. They join the other lesbians who were already there—on the edge and on the street. Another lesbian, born to privilege

but now cut off from that resource, is afraid of being homeless, and so are many of her friends. Lesbians I know, politically active for decades, are now in middle-age, with scant savings, no pensions or property, no inheritances. Where are our Lesbian Mutual Aid Societies? Why are we so often alone in time of need? Do we not at the very least together have the resources to ensure that no lesbian is homeless or hungry? (And what, oh what, do we do about the girls, whose lives are described so powerfully by Lee and Bridget in this issue?)

I know that many dykes who knew JMax or who had heard of her suicide were shocked and disbelieving. I often do not believe it. Surely it was a joke, she will reappear tomorrow? She was such an extraordinary dyke, with so many friends, so generous, courageous and unfettered. So joyful, fierce and visionary. Suicides are lonely, empty people, aren't they? Surely it was someone else? She was all those wonderful things (and *incredibly* funny, too), and in that sense her life was a triumph. She was not meant to live nearly so long nor nearly so well. She was *also* often in agony and, then, so were those close to her. The triumph and the agony were the same person, a truth hard but necessary to encompass.

Over the year prior to her suicide, the very early, very severe incest and abuse she had suffered as a child began to emerge, demanding to be recognized. In the last four months it overwhelmed her. She was tired. Of running. Of fighting.

Now everywhere I turn I hear of another suicidal, incested lesbian. I wake as if from a dream, amazed. Someone tells me today of an 'important new book' entitled *The Enigma of Suicide*. I've read often lately of the 'mystery of suicide.' 'We'll just never know why . . . .' 'You just have to learn to live with ambiguity . . . .' 'Nothing could have been done . . . .' What is behind these patriarchal smokescreens?

Everywhere I turn I see the shadows of abuse: in lesbian lives burdened with depression and despair, in our broken relationships, in our community schisms and trashings. I find abuse behind lesbian battering, behind S&M, behind alcoholism and drug addiction. I suspect incest when I hear of younger lesbians with uterine cancer, any kind of cancer, lupus, emphysema, multiple sclerosis, hodgkin's disease, all immune system diseases, how many other diseases? A friend, one of whose sisters has Multiple Personality Disorder ("That's what they call it—a disorder, we call it a survival skill"), known to be a result of severe child abuse,

## 6 Introduction

tells me that another sister has Sarcoidosis, an immune system disease that attacks different body parts, in this case her sister's lungs are fatally destroyed. Time bombs, planted years ago, exploding all around me.

It's no surprise then that the focus for the next issue of *Lesbian Ethics*, LE 4:3, is *Incest and Child Abuse: A Radical Lesbian Perspective*. The deadline is September 30, 91. (The Readers' Forum on Our Mothers has been moved to LE 5:1, see p. 111.) We are looking for contributions with political analysis and practical knowledge. Analysis of incest and abuse as means of control, oppression and destruction. What does this battleground look like? Practical knowledge (and speculative ideas) about how to heal and how to fight back. I particularly encourage friends and lovers to write; even less is known about our lives, our anguish. I suspect lesbians know a lot of things the patriarchy doesn't tell us about this plague. Pooling our knowledge will give us power.

Although I deeply wanted to, I do not think I alone nor any of her many friends alone could have saved JMax. I do think perhaps WE could have, if WE had been a network, a safety net, that knew what to do. Perhaps if there had been a safe house where lesbians could go during this time of incest crisis. I envision a time when we all talk about incest and abuse without shame, when we all know what to do when a lesbian is suicidal or in crisis, when recovery is a course lesbians have charted, when our communities validate survivors' experiences and celebrate their courage. (And what, oh what, are we going to do about the girls?)

*Jeanette*

# Dykes of Poverty: Coming Home\*

Lee Evans

Dear Jeanette,

*I can't do it.*

*Awhile back you asked JMax, Shoney and I to edit the next issue of Lesbian Ethics which was to be on class. I was excited because it offered me an opportunity to work with two Dykes who I really liked, working on an issue we felt was important.*

*Months after making that commitment, JMax killed herself, and that changed everything. Discussions of 'lack of resources' and 'class privilege' gave way to the concrete results of classism . . . loss, violence, death. At times like this, words like 'oppression' and 'classism' seem as dry and empty as old cicada shells, outlining only the barest contours of our stories.*

*I can't edit this issue. With JMax's death, memories of poverty and abuse have come home to roost in my own backyard. My thoughts drag me to the door of my childhood, to glimpses of the shameful taste of a school lunch I begged a friend to buy for me, to the guilt I felt for not cursing my mother's family when they called my father poor Mexican trash, to the crust that forms on little girls' feelings from getting too little, too late and being subject to too much, too soon. Poverty and abuse, violence and death; words like 'classism' do little to capture the reality.*

*I can't edit this issue. I have no interest in balance right now, in looking at the big picture. My attention is riveted on Dykes of Scarcity, on the price we pay for our silence. I have heard so few Poor Dykes talk about their lives . . . we are so willing to put the past behind us. Who benefits*

---

\*Thanks to my friends for their encouragement during the early drafts of this story, to Ellen Catlin for helping me get to the point, and especially to Kim for going home with me.

*from our silences, what is the cost of passing? What keeps us from talking to each other about poverty? How will our communities change when we speak the truth?*

*I can't edit this issue, Jeanette. I'm very sorry, but I hope you understand . . . for JMax and myself, I need to talk to other Poor Dykes. It's time to head home.*

Lee

## No Escape

One night last spring I had a dream, or rather, I was visited. My two grandmothers, long dead, came to me. "You can choose not to have children, but you cannot choose to not be a part of this family." Then they were gone. I thought about it the next morning, and then put it out of my mind. That night male ancestors appeared in my dreams, but I have no idea what they were saying. The message never got through. (I'm a Separatist.) My dreams have always evidenced my deepest emotions and passions, so I taught myself to remember them, to be attentive to their messages. But this message was very disturbing. Since I left home at the age of seventeen, I have not looked back. Two nights of dead relatives was alarming, so I went to a close friend who I think knows about such things. "Girl," she said, getting very serious, "You'd better listen when the ancestors talk. Because they gonna keep tellin you till you get it."

The third night my grandmothers came again. Hovering above me, wrapped in their importance, they once again deliver their message. My Mexican grandmother does the talking, my Welsh-German grandmother nodding in agreement. Two formidable women united in their purpose, they once again say, "You can choose not to have children, but you cannot choose to not be a part of this family."

For many months I pondered that message, thinking hard about its meaning. But their message was not understood through reason, through logic. It came to me when I heard the news about JMax, that awful moment when all the air rushed out of my lungs, and I wasn't sure if there would be enough air in the room to ever fill my lungs full enough so as not to feel this drowning sensation. At that moment, and in that space, where everything predictable and automatic stops, it was then I understood. "Stop. Stop breathing, stop thinking, stop running. You can't escape your past. It's time to go home."

## Litany of My Childhood

Harry, we need groceries . . . no money, no money . . . Kay, did you pay the electric bill? . . . no money, no money . . . Mom, can I have thirty-five cents for the school field trip tomorrow? . . . no money, no money . . . Mommy, why don't you go outside with us? Because I don't have a winter coat, honey. Why not, mommy? . . . no money, no money . . . Mom, there's a bill collector at the door . . . no money, no money . . . I'm pregnant again dear . . . no money, no money . . . Can I have a glass of milk? . . . no money, no money . . . Mom, is there any way we could get a telephone? . . . no money, no money . . . Don't ask Mom for any thing this week. She and Dad were fighting again last night over . . . no money, no money . . . The washing machine is broken, and the baby needs clean diapers . . . no money, no money . . . Mom, can I have . . . no money, no money . . . no money, no money . . .

## You Shall Know Us By Our Teeth\*

As a poor Dyke, I think about my teeth a lot. I have a memory of a day spent swimming at a lesbian-owned retreat when the subject of dentists came up. One Dyke, a dental student, asked, "What kind of parents wouldn't provide their children with something as important as dental care?" shaking her head in what I think must be disapproval. No one says anything. My friends, a group of ten Dykes from upper middle class, middle class and working class backgrounds, change the subject.

I grow quiet as I think of my childhood, of not having gone to the dentist until I was in my mid-teens (and only then because I was visiting relatives who felt obligated to take me), of having teeth pulled because they were too decayed to fill, of knowing that what stood between the pain of an infected tooth and the relief of novocaine was something as simple and elusive as a couple of twenty dollar bills. Shame washes over me and I realize that I am the type of person the dental student is talking about, shame that my parents couldn't manage money better, shame that there wasn't more money to manage. Yet, I am more ashamed of myself for whining about it. We believed we didn't have it all that bad. Other people had it far worse.

---

\*With acknowledgement to Elana Dykewomon. *They Will Know Me By My Teeth* (Northampton: Megaera Press, 1976). Poems.

I have the urge to stop this playful group, this group of friends that have gone on to other topics, and tell them, "The answer to that question is my kind of parents, my parents couldn't provide their kids with dental care." But as I watch my friends playfully splashing each other, gossiping about friends and lovers on a sunny summer afternoon, there is no context to talk about poverty, about scarcity. So I keep my mouth shut, for my mouth is one of the places I carry evidence of my poverty.

My younger sister was the only kid in my family to have braces. When I knocked out one of her permanent front teeth in a wrestling match, a third one grew in sideways, and between her bottom two eye-teeth where four teeth should have been, five pushed their way in all raggedy and crooked. A poor kid's mouth if there ever was one, much like a poor kid's life, too much crowded in too small a space. Braces were in order, and once again my mom's family intervened by paying for my sister's dental care.

My aunt and grandmother knew the value of a dollar. They talked to a country-club friend of theirs who was a dentist, and he agreed to straighten my sister's teeth. His role was to do the work as fast and as cheaply as possible, my aunt's and grandmother's roles were to provide the charity, and our roles were to be grateful for their help.

My sister's braces caused her a lot of pain. My dad yelled at her for crying. She didn't smile much that year.

Fifteen years later, my sister woke up with one of her front teeth laying on her pillow. She was referred to a specialist. "How long were your braces on for? It looks as if the dentist who did your braces did the work too quickly, in too short a period of time. There was too much pressure put on your bone, so your upper jaw bone has been severely traumatized and is beginning to crumble. If you ever get hit in the face, your bones will fall apart like old plaster. You can expect to lose more teeth. The good news is that we can do a bone graft from your hipbone, and then fit you with false teeth. It will cost several thousand dollars. What kind of dental insurance do you have?" "None."

Two more teeth on her pillow a week later, another while eating dinner a few weeks after that. Teeth dropping from her mouth, no longer a surprise. The dentist, my aunt and my grandmother have all been dead for many years now. There's not even anyone left to get mad at.

With poverty nothing much ever changes. My sister still doesn't smile much.

## Hunger Pains

Poor food varies from home to home. We ate monotonous dinners: rice and tomato sauce, hamburger, Spam, canned vegetables, and always water to drink. Milk for six kids cost too much. Bologna or peanut butter sandwiches for school lunches. Ketchup and mustard sandwiches for snacks. Food of the rural poor, food that kept us alive, food for which we should be grateful. We were told kids in India had far less. It was many years later that I realized much of the food we ate was an act of charity on the part of the man who ran our small neighborhood grocery store. He let my mother buy food on credit, knowing the bill wouldn't get paid, knowing that when all is said and done, hungry children still need to eat.

When my father was laid off, we were offered free milk in the school cafeteria. The school nurse came to our house and told my mother and me of this generous offer. My mother taught us kids to be polite and gracious, and she awaited my well-mannered response. In a moment of irritation, I refused the offer unless the school nurse would up the ante and make it chocolate milk. Many children had far less, but I was eleven and already tired of being grateful.

When I was thirteen my mother died, and I became the cook in the family. We would eat pancakes for what seemed like weeks on end. Cereal and cookies for breakfast, peanut butter for lunch, and pancakes for dinner. Cheap food, and all on credit, of course. Many people ate far worse and had much less. Me, I ate as much as I could, often fighting with my older brother over food. Fights that erupted into screaming matches, with us punching and hitting to make the other let go of the last bowl of ice cream. When my grandmother would visit, she would often chide me for trying to take as much food as my brother. She would divide out the food, giving me half what she gave him. "This is how it should be done," she explained. "Boys need more food."

Lois, the next door neighbor lady, would invite me over every afternoon after school, and she would feed me. She loved to watch me eat, laughing and shaking her head, but always giving me more. She was loud and defiant and laughed at my father's rages, encouraging me to be mouthy and tough. She communicated to me through cursing, food, and laughter.

"You little shit, if I ever catch you skipping school again, I'll beat your ass good. Have some more rabbit." . . . "So, you and your father are

fighting again, get a piece of that chocolate cream pie and tell me about it, but first quit your goddam crying and be sure and wash that plate when you're done." She taught me lessons: how to fight back, how to turn fear and sorrow into anger, how responsibilities don't stop just because you have more than you could ever handle in two lifetimes, how to spit back at adversity, and how to take care of myself and my sisters and brother the best I could.

Lois also knew that at the age of fourteen, I needed something to sustain me, something I could hold on to, and this she provided in abundance. Afternoons of laughing at problems, of turning bad times into comedy routines, all the while feeding me: food and laughter, laughter and food. These were the tools of survival, Pennsylvania style.

Food became a place to focus my attention when things got bad at home. The summer I was fifteen I developed late night food cravings. I would wake up some time in the night, my mind racing with problems. Cooking and cleaning and keeping house and raising my three younger siblings, staying out of my father's way, lying to bill collectors, putting up with my older brother's alcoholic tantrums, trying to find a way to take the younger kids and run away on a Greyhound bus . . . to where? That summer my middle-of-the-night hungers were so immediate, so intense, that I would bully my younger sister into going outside to the plum tree at 3 a.m. to pick the not-yet-ripe plums, and I would eat away my night terrors.

This anxiety about food developed into food rituals that I have only in the last few years come to understand. I would get panicky waiting in lines for food, sure that they would run out just before it got to my turn. My friends remarked that I would always leave a little food on my plate. I would take more than I could possibly eat, and always throw some out. Wasteful, my friends called me. True. But the other truth is that not having enough food created a terrible anxiety in me. If I could leave food on my plate after a meal, enough to throw away, surely that was a sign of plenty. Surely it was a sign that life wasn't all that hard. I was in my thirties before I could eat a plate of food, only taking what I needed, finishing it all, and not feel anxious. Yet just last week my boss suggested that because of an unusually heavy workload, I might not be able to go to lunch. I stared at him in disbelief, and then felt a very old and familiar panic welling up from that place I thought was left behind. I've come so far, yet a missed lunch can still grab me by the throat and drop-kick me twenty-five years into the past, to a time when food meant survival, and my hunger was never satiated.

## Fear of Falling

I was seventeen, and my father had kicked me out six months earlier. I had a toothache that hurt so bad I was up for two days and a night, the pain enough to make me hysterical. I chose a dentist out of the phone book and called for an appointment. I had no money to pay him right away, but he told me to come in and we would work something out. I was so relieved. He examined me and decided my tooth could be filled. After drilling my tooth part way, and hitting the nerve one too many times, he suggested that hypnotism might help if the novocaine was wearing off. "Just listen to my voice, you're getting sleepy, it's very hot in here, pretend you're on a beach, it's getting hotter and you're getting uncomfortable. Take off your blouse and bra." I stared straight ahead, not believing . . . only vaguely aware of his hand, like a large hairy spider, crawling up and down my thigh. I pretended not to hear his instructions. My tongue searched out the half-drilled tooth, as I sat frozen not daring to move. When he finished filling my tooth, he said that if I didn't have the money to pay my bill, he was sure we could work something out.

Special financial arrangements are often available to poor females. Not reading the fine print can be costly.

JMax and I talked about teeth the first time we met. I told her about the molester dentist, and about my sister's teeth. She told me that the nuns of her high school and their dentist had conspired to have her teeth pulled at the age of 17. "Poor people can't afford to take care of their teeth, you might as well have them pulled and you'll be fitted with false teeth," they explained to her. I've had teeth pulled before, and I remember the incredible pressure and the sound of crunching. I think of this Dyke I like so much, this Dyke who is strong and competent, and I imagine her having her teeth pulled because some prick dentist thought that poor people didn't take care of their teeth anyway. I respected her strength too much to be emotional when she told me. I know she understood, because she was raised poor too, and knew that it was too soon for emotion. Instead, we use our stories to check each other out. Our reactions will answer important questions we must ask of each other at this stage. Are you so sheltered that you think this is unusual? Does my life make you squeamish? Do you use humor and laughter to talk about hard things? Are you smart enough not to poke around in feelings that are so carefully contained? Do you have the caring and the attention span and the strength to bear witness?

I've used this test many times, a familiar dance between Dykes of scar-city. It is often not conscious, and rarely talked about.

Max and I look at each other and nod our heads, our eyes acknowledging that we have passed this first important test. "Yea, they're real fuckers out there, alright. They'll get you every time they can." A thin strand of trust is cast between us, as tentative as spider silk, and just as strong. I hope this is the beginning of a web of trust, a safety net for when the next strong wind blows.

A friend once told me that she had to take Valium before going to the dentist. "Why?" I asked. "Because I'm afraid of going to the dentist," she explained. "Did something happen?" I wanted to know. "Oh, no, I'm just afraid of the pain." What a luxury, I thought. To know that you're afraid and to be able to pinpoint your fear so specifically, and then to leave your fear at the dentist's office when you walk out the door.

I begin to understand that I rarely feel fear, and yet I have often been in frightening situations. My jobs have been dangerous for many years now. Working with abused teen-age girls who respond with fists and teeth, going into crack houses to talk to drug dealers and strawberries about sexually transmitted diseases, helping a battered woman get her kids and belongings out of the house before her abusive biker-husband comes back from the bar. And I wonder what fear feels like, except that surely it must be that feeling of anxiety when my car breaks down, and there is no money to repair it. It must feel like having no way to get to work, and with no work comes no money to repair the car. Is it like the time I had no money, and had to steal toilet paper from restaurants, and sold a battery for food money? It must be that feeling of needing money, and having no one to ask, because they're broke too, or because it's just too hard to ask middle-class friends for money to pay the loan that's three months behind. This feeling must be the cold steel bars that drop down between my friend and me when I try to explain the difference between need and want, and her not seeing any difference, and me realizing that I had trusted her. It must be coming home to find the electricity shut off; it is the bill collector on the phone; it is the phone being shut off; it is a letter saying I'm being sued for unpaid bills. It feels like the worry of knowing my younger sister has a kidney infection, and she has no money to pay a doctor. It is the day my mother died and they came to repossess the furniture. It is being fifteen, and coming home to an empty house with my eight year old brother's blood splattered on floor and walls, a shotgun in the bedroom, and knowing that I shouldn't have let

my guard down for a minute because something bad always happened. It is living with a father who was a sadist, and who nailed baby birds into their birdhouse, with their mama frantically trying to get in to feed them, until a few days later their peepings finally weakened and stopped. It is knowing that if my father poisoned the neighbor's dog to stop it from barking, then what did he do to us kids to keep us quiet? It's knowing that my mother, who married into poverty at the age of 21, died at the age of 44 from hard work and too many babies, and her mother, who had a middle class standard of living all her life, lived to be 92. It's being fifteen and having my father ask me to make the decision whether my younger sisters and brother and I should be put into foster homes, or if he should hire a housekeeper to supervise us kids better, and then telling me to remember that he has . . . no money, no money. It's knowing if I begin to feel fear, I will end up on the floor, croaking out my terror, unrecognizable to my friends and to myself. And knowing that this will never happen because strength is its own curse, and no matter how many times I feel I've hit my limit, I realize that for some of us, there are no time outs. Limits are a luxury when life doesn't stop to acknowledge them. Surviving has made me strong; it means always being ready for the next crisis, for the next time I lose my footing. Yet, for people with no safety net, the fall is sometimes deadly.

"You feel afraid?" I ask my Valium-taking friend, but I think she was raised with many cushions, and doesn't know what I am asking.

## In the Cellar

A friend called one Sunday in late November and told me JMax had killed herself. JMax and I were not close friends, but our backgrounds gave us some common bonds. We met at a Separatist conference a few years ago, and immediately liked each other. She was one of the first Dykes I knew who talked openly about being raised poor, who wasn't trying to pass. We talked about classism, about our childhoods, gossiped about people we knew, made each other laugh, liked each other's politics. Eventually we committed to co-editing the *Lesbian Ethics* issue on class.

The safety net we had so carefully begun to weave when we first met never really developed any further . . . her in New Mexico, me in Ohio, time and distance hindering our developing anything more sustaining than occasional phone calls. A few weeks earlier, I had had a

conversation with JMax that left me alarmed and worried. She told me she wanted to kill herself, that she was tormented with prolonged and tortuous incest flashbacks. We talked some about them, and I had hoped she could hang on, this tough Dyke who had already survived so much.

And now, I was on the phone hearing the news of her suicide, the image of JMax with a gun burned into my mind, my grief sliced clean with the rhythm of Audre Lorde's words, "They never meant for us to survive."

After years of expecting the worst, of being on constant guard, I still wasn't ready. Poverty and abuse and dead women . . . the story is as old as dirt.

Lack of access to medical care and food, unpredictable every-day violence, threats and harassment, watching those you love suffer, these are the things that leave body and soul stunned and weary. Do we know what this does to little girls? The result is that the struggle to maintain day-to-day functioning becomes too overwhelming, and people begin to lose their will to live. Death often comes from stress-related diseases, avoidable accidents, and suicide. When it happens in Nicaragua we call it 'low-intensity warfare.' It doesn't have the Rambo-like glory of full-fledged warfare, but it is much more cost effective. They don't have to kill us, they just constrict our lives to the point where suicide is the easiest way. Some of us die right away, some of us have shortened life spans, and some of us have a time-bomb that ticks away until some unknown source sets it off.

There is a dream I've had for most of my life. I am standing outside the Pennsylvania home I grew up in, and it is a late summer afternoon. I watch the sky turn a sickly yellow, and know something is happening. The sky begins to darken and the wind picks up. Soon leaves are ripped from the trees, and whirl about my head. On the horizon I see a twister begin to form. A tornado is headed our way. I scramble around, gathering cats and kids, taking them to the cellar. They climb back out. I cannot be heard above the roaring as I scream that we are in danger. Garbage cans, and people, and animals fly by the basement window as the foundation of the old house shakes and groans. I gather the kids and cats again, and again, and again. Every time they climb out of the cellar, I drag them back. They don't realize the danger, they are too young to know of such things. A mighty storm rages outside, and the only safety is in the cellar. This I know to be true.

I have been told this dream is about abuse. "Yes," I reply, "didn't you know poverty is one form of abuse?"

I talked to my sister last spring, and asked her if she was saving money for her dental work. I was suspicious because she had been sending me money for tuition as I was making a final push to finish up my bachelor's degree at the age of 38. "I'd rather you take the money and try to get your teeth fixed," I said, trying to convince her. "Your health is affected by not having teeth." She shot me a look that told me she knew the choice she was making, and wanted me to understand. "You have to get a degree, you're smart, and Mom would have wanted that. This way you'll always have something to fall back on," she explained. I was stunned as a realization resonated through me; my sister loved me enough to pay for my reservation in the cellar. She knew the bottom line was survival.\*

## Creating a Home

My Radical Lesbian Separatist politics are rooted in my life experiences. While I now have enough money to live on, I believe it is only a matter of luck that keeps me from being poor again.\*\* Poverty, abuse, and strong women have been some of my strongest influences. I can have money, but I can never erase the experience of poverty.

Lesbians often fail to address the fact that in any given group of Dykes there are those who are on the thin edge of survival, who may be struggling to get adequate medical care, enough food, money for essentials, or maybe just the time and space and support to crawl out from under their load. In a movement that is designed to help us distinguish between choices that are liberating and choices that are false, why do so few Lesbians understand that poverty is about having no choices? If we are not actively addressing the survival of Lesbians, then can we say we're serious about designing real alternatives? Are we playing house without creating home?


Creating alternatives to patriarchy means that we have to shit or get off the pot. We all have a responsibility to make our communities truly

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\*As Irene Weiss pointed out in conversation, poor and working class Dykes often think of a college degree as a kind of union card. We think it means that we will always be able to find work (above minimum wage) and therefore it is our ticket out of poverty.

\*\*On reading this, Jeanette reminded me that it has only been a few months since I had been unemployed for over a year, was out of money, was living at a friend's house, and had a car that didn't work.

diverse, and a place where all Dykes can feel at home. I leave it to upper-class, middle-class, and working-class Dykes to figure out what their responsibilities are. As for Poor Dykes, I can only speak for myself. It is time for me to come home. It is time to stop passing and start talking with other Poor Dykes about the truth of our lives. I have had to be strong in order to survive. I thought that was enough. It was only in the quiet moments after JMax's death that I began to realize how much this strength costs me and other Poor Dykes. I grieve for us, and especially for the ones who didn't make it.



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## No Mercenary Warrior

*Bridget Collins*

I am not a mercenary warrior. As a woman born to poverty, my first loyalty is to other women of poverty. It is often difficult to reconcile this position with my life as a radical lesbian feminist. How, for instance, am I to receive discussions of classism which address only the interface between the working and middle classes, while ignoring poverty women, who by definition must bear the heaviest onus of class oppression?

It seems to me obvious that the poverty women who have lived to tell about it must necessarily have words of value to offer to the discussion of classism. Classism is not merely offending and insulting us. It is murdering us. It is casting us into prisons made of concrete and steel, as well as the prisons of addiction, teen pregnancy, domestic violence, and inadequate education. It forces us to become warriors before we lose our milk teeth and demands that we harden our hearts before we grow to full size. If we manage to learn to trust our instincts and hunches, if we can kick our brains into gear when panic would more naturally prevail, then we survive.

We create the very notion of hope out of our own gossamer dreams, and at poverty, gossamer is in short supply. We exist as testament to our own endeavor. We have been compelled to improvise and to create the avenues by which we survive classism at its most vicious, yet in discussions of classism, what we have to say is largely ignored. It serves little purpose to ascribe intent to motives which one does not understand, yet I cannot help but wonder at the motives of those who aspire to comprehend class oppression while denying the credibility of those who survived the front lines of that battle.

Because we live as prey, women of poverty learn that it is unwise to form into groups, for as groups, we make easier targets. One poor person is regarded as a manageable criminal, two are a gang, three or more constitute a riot. To avoid the repercussions of being perceived as a threat,

poverty women often keep to themselves. By and large, we live lives of abiding isolation. When you are thoroughly absorbed in protecting your back, you tend to eschew any approaches to your front or flank. Because of this, it is incumbent on me to say that I can only truly speak of the phenomena of poverty from a very personal perspective. While there are many, many women of poverty, we each experience it alone and those of us who survive it do so alone. The old reflexes die hard. While we must on one hand depend on one another, we learn that we must ultimately depend on ourselves to survive. Women of poverty learn to give trust reluctantly. A mistaken trust will not only result in a broken heart, but possibly in the loss of our next breath and heartbeat.

And so, I will reiterate this very important point: I speak from a personal perspective. My experience is that of nomadic poverty, shifting from migrant farm camps to rural poverty to inner city squalor. I cannot speak as one who has ever stayed in one neighborhood for a full generation or as one who has managed to maintain her family through a lifetime of picking fruit. There are many women of poverty with experience akin to mine. Transience is a very real part of what life at poverty is. It is however not the only avenue of poverty. Black poverty, white poverty, Latin poverty, immigrant poverty, rural poverty, urban poverty, the poverty of those who live in cars, on the streets, on reservations, in institutions, in servant's quarters, in migrant camps . . . . Poverty is everywhere and takes many forms. What we all have in common is that we are regarded as expendable. We are on the outside looking in, but we are looking in from many different windows.

## Interfaces

The middle class and the poor seldom encounter each other, and so, as a woman born to poverty, the naming of the middle class as the ultimate classist aggressor seems ludicrous to me. I am not unaware of how the middle class benefits from the oppression of the poor, but in my neighborhoods, it was not the middle class who were arresting us and shaking us down. It was not the middle class beating us up, spitting on us, robbing us of our integrity. It is the working class who actively and vehemently hate the poor.

In radical lesbian discussions of classism, poverty is occasionally included as a subgroup of the working class. The sardonic irony of this is astonishing. The working class affirm repeatedly that their families never

took a dime that they hadn't earned, that they would have died rather than accept welfare or food stamps. They rankle at being treated like poor people, at being regarded as part of the undeserving and unfortunate teeming masses. They make little or no attempt to hide their contempt for what they regard as the lazy, crazy, criminal, poverty class, and yet no one ever calls them on their own classism. In fact, their claims to hard working virtue are offered as proof that the working class absolutely does not deserve to bear the burden of classist oppression. This very argument implies that the poor do deserve to be oppressed.

While the working class and the middle class seem to have an ongoing feud raging, poverty so seldom comes in contact with the middle class that there is very little opportunity for any genuine animosity to develop. Those few middle class individuals whom we do encounter are usually intending benevolence. They are social workers, community activists, church people, or school teachers. While it is recognized that these people often do more harm than good to poor people, it is also recognized that, however convoluted and confused their efforts may seem, they generally intend kindness.

As a woman of poverty, I am sometimes struck by what appears to me to be the vapidness of the middle class, and often I have been stunned by their emotional sterility. I distrust the middle class when they pity us. Poverty learns early on that pity is merely honeyed contempt. In all honesty, I cannot say that I bear the middle class any abiding malice. I find their assumption that I would prefer their lives to my own irksome. I would not trade my experience, my family, my friends, my entire life to have a middle class life. The arrogance of that assumption is galling, but beyond that, I have never known them well enough to develop any passionate emotion towards them. The only exceptions to this that come to mind are judges and the "ten-dollar man."

A long white car used to drive through Chicago's Uptown, a very poor, racially mixed neighborhood. It was a new car, a Cadillac or a Lincoln, and it contrasted sharply with the broken down relics that littered Uptown's streets. The driver of the car was a middle-aged white man. As he drove through the neighborhood, he paused occasionally, sliding down his electric windows to speak with the women and girls on the street. He was the "ten-dollar man," and everybody knew what he wanted. If a girl would agree to get into his car and perform oral sex, he would pay her ten dollars. Mostly, we laughed at him, but he was a clever fellow. He knew that the most promising time to visit Uptown was

toward the end of the month when women's food stamps had run out and their AFDC checks were still a week away. That was when the "ten-dollar man" could find a taker or two for his proposition. Though we tried to laugh him away, we hated him. We hated his white car. We hated the home we supposed he lived in, we hated the power his ten dollars could wield, and I suppose we hated the woman whom we imagined shared his house and who did not keep him on a tight enough rein. The "ten-dollar man" is the only middle class individual whom I ever had the opportunity to learn to hate.

The "ten-dollar man" was not the only one to seek out poverty girls as sexual targets. Boys from the working class are encouraged to sow their wild oats with poverty girls, but to marry "nice" girls, i.e., their own kind. Not until I became an adult did I learn that rape is generally regarded as a crime. Growing up, I believed it to be merely a part of life, a denigrating and humiliating rite of passage which every woman must endure.

The working class provide the poor with considerable fodder for bitterness. For years in the lesbian community I have listened to working class women bemoan their oppression at the hands of the middle class. In my experience, when lesbians talk about classism, they are generally referring to the interface between middle class and working class. To date, I have not heard the classism discussions address the interface between the working class and the poor. I suspect that the middle class women's fear of being labeled classist precludes their listening, and the working class claim to classist victimization cannot afford the truths that women of poverty would bring to the discussion of classism.

As I have said, we seldom encounter the middle class and so, seldom develop genuine feelings about them. However we do encounter the working class with frightening regularity. The interface between the working class and the poor is often fraught with violence. We were the kids they mugged on the bus, slammed into the lockers, and harassed with unyielding fervor. They were the salt of the earth. We were the scum of the earth. Lest we forget our place, the working class infused our lives with vicious and cruel reminders that they were noble and hard working people. We were the human garbage that polluted their environs. The message was clear. They had every reason to be proud, while we merited shame. Their efforts were to be honored, ours were to be scorned and ridiculed.

Yes, I do understand that the working class has a legitimate case to make in the classism arena. The middle class treat them badly and disrespectfully. However the insinuation that the working class are candidates for canonization in this arena completely astounds my sensibilities and disregards the abuses that poverty regularly suffers at working class hands. The intimation that, had the working class had the power that the middle class wields, they would have used it more benevolently is completely without merit. The working class does have power. They have power over the poor, and they abuse it with a determination that the middle class can only imagine. If in radical lesbian discussions of classism, I ever hear working class women accepting even a fraction of the culpability that they foist into the laps of middle class women, I will be both stunned and heartened. At that point, these discussions will truly gain some measure of credibility to me. Until that time, I will regard these discussions as exercises in shaming the middle class to guilt and aggrandizing the working class to supercilious sainthood. I am serious about my radical lesbian politics, and I am eager to see classism openly and honestly addressed. I am not a mercenary warrior however, and I see not point in fighting battles in which the issues of poverty go unattended.

## Classism is Murder

There are many issues which relate particularly to poverty which I wish radical lesbian feminists would acknowledge and address. The average age of mortality for women of poverty is between 47 and 52 years old. When we discuss the rights and respect due to lesbian elders, it would be gratifying to hear it at least noticed that poor women seldom ever live long enough to join the ranks of the elders.

A recent phenomenon in lesbian circles is to hold events which use racial quotas of 50% lesbians of color and 50% white lesbians. These events cost money, and so the first to register for them will be women who are sure of their money situation. The sequence of registration by class is an inevitable one. Those most certain of their resources three months down the line will be able to register three months ahead. Those who are playing catch as catch can with their resources will not know until the last minute if they will be able to spare the time and money to attend an event. For an event which has established racial quotas, this results in an attendance which is 50% lesbians of color and 50% white lesbians from middle and working class backgrounds. White women of

poverty are virtually excluded because, by the time we are able to register, the quota for white women has already been filled.

Attempting to navigate the seams between my commitment to women of poverty and my commitment to the feminist movement has often been very difficult. In the battle for reproductive rights, Operation Rescue has been clearly named an enemy of the feminist movement. I agree that every woman should have the right of reproductive choice and so on this issue stand with my feminist sisters in renouncing Operation Rescue's position. Yet the children of the poor, based on their poverty and their parents' lack of access to resources, are routinely rejected in the selection process for organ transplants, experimental treatments, and potentially lifesaving surgeries. To date, only Operation Rescue has rallied against the practice of condemning the children of the poor to death based solely on the economic status of their parents. Of course, I believe in and support a woman's right to choose. I also believe in a poor child's right to live the life that she has been born to. How can I fully and wholeheartedly denounce Operation Rescue when only they have stood against the barbarism of the medical selection process as it relates to the children of poverty? As a woman of poverty, it is just one of the quandaries which I must navigate. I do so by keeping Operation Rescue in mind as a strange bedfellow. I continue to support any woman's right to choice, and at the same time, I will refuse to carry an organ donor card until some chance exists that people of poverty will benefit from the organ donor program. I am not a mercenary warrior.

The problem of gang activity in the inner cities is overwhelming. Young men armed with guns and dealing drugs bring a sad and violent picture to mind. Yet in poor neighborhoods where the role of the police is primarily to arrest and abuse, and almost never to serve and protect, the gangs serve a purpose. They are often the closest thing to a police force which exist in poverty neighborhoods.

As a teen-aged girl in Uptown, I avoided any involvement with the gangs that ruled the streets there. As far as I was concerned, they were pitching their lives down a dead end alley. I knew I did not want to make that trip with them. A day came when I was walking down the street and was yanked into a gangway by a man whom I had never seen before. As he dragged me between the building, ripping at my clothes, boys clad in denim and black leather filled both ends of the gangway. They entered the fracas and pulled me free of the man. They told him that they intended to teach him not to "fuck with Uptown's home girls."

I left before they administered the lesson, and so cannot tell you what exactly they did to my would-be assailant. I never wanted to know and so never asked. I will not forget though that they saved my hide that day. While the police do not perceive the rape of a poor woman as a crime, gang members do perceive the assault on a home girl by an outsider as a crime to be averted and avenged. Does this forgive the violence that gangs do in their own neighborhoods? No. Does it forgive the truth that those same gang members would feel entitled to rape the home girls themselves? No. When there are no police though, these vigilantes will step in, committing all the sins and taking all the liberties that are the hallmarks of vigilantism. So, do I want gang activity stopped? Yes, I do. Do I worry about what will happen in poor neighborhoods if gangs are wiped out? Very much.

Education in poor neighborhoods is hopelessly inadequate. The dropout rate for children of poverty is overwhelming, and for poverty girls, the situation is particularly bleak. I left Uptown after dropping out of high school. In the years that followed, I managed to get a GED and then worked two full time jobs to put myself through college. I earned a degree in sociology, and then returned to Uptown to work with adolescents. I ran a career training program which prepared kids for white collar work. At the beginning of one year, 90 students who had dropped out of high school enrolled in the program. Of these 60 were boys and 30 were girls. By year's end, 25 boys had finished the program. Every one of the girls had dropped out, most due to the demands of unexpected pregnancies.

Poverty girls are born with the label of "slut" hanging over their heads. They are barely out of diapers before they become the sexual prey of boys and men from all classes, including, and perhaps most especially, poverty. In a place where growing up very quickly is necessary in order to survive, sexual maturity is hard pressed to keep up with sexual activity. And so, babies are born to babies. Fourteen-year old girls are compelled into motherhood, coerced away from an education, and forced into the degradation of the welfare system. (That we have opted to use the term "welfare" for a system which degrades and humiliates its recipients is a particularly cruel and insulting irony.) In fact, it will not matter how many new computers and textbooks are added to poverty schools if adolescent pregnancies preclude the students' presence in the classroom.

In many states, the lottery has been offered as the solution to the problem of educational opportunity. The irony of this is no less cruel than the use of the term "welfare system." By and large, the millions of dollars raised through lotteries comes directly out of poor neighborhoods. People teased by the possibility of escape from the ongoing degradation wind up providing the financial support for a system from which they will almost certainly receive minimal benefit. In grocery stores where no other concession to bilingualism is even attempted, only the lottery advertisements are posted in both English and Spanish. Millions of dollars, many of which are welfare dollars, are taken out of poor neighborhoods and recirculated "equally" throughout the lotteries' home states.

I am anxious for the day when lesbian discussion of classism include the topics of the function of gangs at poverty level, the sexual exploitation and abuse of poverty women and girls, the health care of the poor, and the inadequacies of the educational system as it relates to poverty. While the discussions of classism address only the interface between the middle and working classes, it is difficult for me not to close my ears and harden my heart. The discussion seems to focus on the hurt feelings and compromised self esteem of the working class. I truly regret their pain, but I recoil at the notion that these issues of classism seem to have taken precedence over the fact that classism is not just compromising the perceived self worth of poverty women. It is killing us. It is killing our children. It is killing our mothers and our sisters and our friends. My mother and sister are dead. I saw my friends die. I have seen more miscarriages and stillbirths among the women of my family than I have seen live births. Classism is a deadly and formidable enemy. I cannot and will not forget that.

It is impossible for me to attend to or to believe in discussions of classism which trivialize the impact of class hatred. For women of poverty, classism is not just a matter of hurt feelings or low self esteem. We bear the enormity of classism's weight. If we are not crushed by it, it makes us very strong women. We are scattered throughout Lesbos, and we have a great deal to offer in the battle against classism. To date, we have represented an untapped resource in lesbian discussions about classism. It is my fervent hope that this will change.

Of middle class lesbians, I would ask that you stop caressing your guilt and allow for the possibility that classism is not merely a function of

your relationships with the working class. Listen. Notice that you have rarely, if ever, heard a woman of poverty speak in classism discussions, and ask yourself why. Not a lot of us survive to name the names and tell the stories, but when we do survive, when we offer you the information, for the love of the Mother, listen. What we have to say you have not heard before. Do not suppose when we recount the ravages of classism that we are hating our lives as poor women. It would be no wiser for a poor woman to curse her poverty background than it would be wise for a pot to curse the kiln or a sword to curse the forge. As much as you are the product of your life, so we are the products of ours. We have earned our survival as you have earned yours. Truth to tell, I am not sure that I could have survived the emotional sterility of the middle class. I comforted myself well at poverty though. I will honor and respect the battles which you had to fight in order to become a lesbian, and I ask those same courtesies of you.

Of working class lesbians I would ask that you acknowledge the interface between the working and poverty classes, and tell the truth about the vehement hatred which exists there. Your role in classism has been a dual one. You stand as both the oppressed and the oppressor. Classism is not limited to the vagaries of the middle/working class interface. You know that. While you were aspiring to the middle class, you were also eschewing and belittling the poverty class. Please add this information to the discussions of classism. It is not my intent to diminish the impact of what you suffered in the arena of classism. I ask a similar courtesy of you.

Of my sisters, of other women of poverty, I would ask that you insist on being heard. Refuse to be mercenary warriors. You more than anyone know the price that classism exacts. Do not be shamed or intimidated away from the truth. More than anything, I ask you to continue doing what you have always done. Resist the temptation to make love to the pain. Instead, celebrate your survival and your strength. I ask that you not be seduced by pity. Those who would prefer to pity us rather than honor us do not understand. They offer a siren song of sympathy that is occasionally enticing, but ultimately destructive. We danced on death's borders and survived. That is not cause for mourning, but for jubilation. Your loves, your passions, your determination bought you every breath and heartbeat. You are amazing and formidable warriors. That is a sound and sturdy truth worthy of your embrace.

# Did Your Mother Do Volunteer Work? An Introduction to the Class Issue

*Marilyn Murphy*

For the past fifteen years at least, radical feminists, most of us Lesbians, have been writing, speaking and conducting workshops about class as a major influence in the development of our values, attitudes and behavior; as a system of personal and institutional oppression; as a cause of friction in our personal relationships; and as an issue which divides women and creates obstacles to our working together to liberate ourselves and our sisters from personal and institutional oppression of all kinds. Our other intra-movement issues: racism, internalized homophobia, able-bodiedism, anti-semitism, ageism, fatophobia usually are acknowledged as issues, if only by those women suffering from their effects. Even Lesbians who insist the fat woman or the disabled Lesbian, for example, is "misunderstanding" their attitudes, remarks or behavior will acknowledge that the issues do exist. This is not usually true about class.

Before we can even begin a discussion about class differences and their effects, we first have to demonstrate that they exist. People in the U.S. are willing to concede that the very, very rich and the very, very poor may not be like the rest of us, as long as we can keep our belief that the rest of us are pretty much the same. Most people in the U.S. are middle-class, we say, not too rich and not too poor, more or less equal. This myth of a mostly classless U.S. society is an important factor for keeping our class system in place and unthreatened by revolution or trade unions. The invisibility of class oppression, this denial of "difference," insures a cohesiveness of belief in the United States as a place where most of the people have a more or less equal opportunity to live

the "good life." It intensifies the belief, congruent with a "classless society," that the only real barriers to success are laziness, ignorance, immorality, cowardice, heredity, lack of ambition or perseverance and/or the inferiority of one's sex, race, ethnicity. It teaches us that "anyone" can make it in the U.S. just by "wanting it enough," by working "hard enough." Because even members of oppressed classes and groups internalize these beliefs to a greater or lesser degree, they are more likely to think of themselves as "failures" than as members of an oppressed class—and so are their oppressors.

Also, those in the U.S. who experience oppression for other, more apparently "obvious" reasons than class, such as people of colors, Jews, Lesbians, disabled people, usually do not attribute their problems to their socio-economic class, or they believe class oppression is not important in light of their other oppression. In a certain sense, this is true. Racism, for example, limits the participation of people of colors in institutions like unions which are organizations of and for working people. Therefore, it is difficult, and does not seem particularly profitable to people of colors themselves to try to separate racism from class oppression.

In addition, the upward mobility, whether real or imagined, of some poor and working class people whose teachers or social workers chose them for "special" treatment when children, or who received scholarships, grants, loans, the GI bill and/or who worked and sacrificed for an education, who made money, who were lucky enough to become rich as athletes or entertainers, who married up—like Cinderella, convinces most people, including the upwardly mobile and those they leave behind, that class differences and the resultant oppression do not "really" exist. It also masks the reality that upwardly mobile poor and working class people bring to our new lives the values, behaviors and attitudes we learned in our childhood and youth, that we are living middle class life-styles with a poverty or working class perspective, that we are frequently out of sync with our new environment.

My purpose in writing this paper is to share some of what I have learned from my own personal experiences, from academic study, and from the women I have worked with in creating, facilitating and participating in feminist programs on class differences since 1975. This paper continues to be a "work in progress," changing as we learn more, as we refine our ideas. Much of what follows are generalizations, fitting the experiences of some Lesbians more or less than others. This is not an exercise in comparing oppressions or blaming. We are not responsible

for the privileges of our birth. The class system exists for the benefit of those at the top, and is designed to keep the classes separated and antagonistic. I offer these thoughts as an exercise in understanding.\*

I hope this paper helps Lesbians with working class and poverty origins to identify some of the values, attitudes and behaviors we learned during childhood. With this knowledge, we can abandon those which are no longer appropriate in our lives and those which are oppressive to others. We can recognize and cherish those others which vitalize and enhance our lives, our relationships and our struggles to eliminate the oppression of all women. I want poverty and working class Lesbians to recognize when our "out of sync" feeling comes from class differences, so we can let it go as "inappropriate" when we need to, or to stand firm for what we know from our life experiences is right and true. I hope middle-class Lesbians will become more class conscious, ridding themselves of values, attitudes and behaviors that are oppressive to working and poverty class Lesbians and to the hidden, upwardly mobile poverty and working class Lesbians in their midst. I want them to be able to catch themselves when a Lesbian's style, grammar, clothes or "deportment" inclines them to dismiss the ideas she presents. I'd like to see middle-class Lesbians remember that their feeling of confidence and "rightness" of their rules, decisions, judgements comes, at least some of the time, from their class privilege. In these ways, all of us can learn to work, love and relate to each other in more authentic, more powerful ways, as allies and sisters in the struggle for our liberation.

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\*This paper began as the introduction to an experiential, two hour workshop on class created by the working and poverty class Lesbians on the Califia Community Collective, of which I was a founding member, in Southern California in 1975. Califia Community, named in honor of the brown-skinned goddess for whom California was named, was a feminist education organization which did much good work during its ten year existence. Three articles about Califia Community and the programs and processes we created, including how we did the class presentation are included in *Learning Our Way*, edited by Charlotte Bunch and Sandra Pollack. Originally published by Crossing Press, *Learning Our Way* is being reissued this May by Sororal Press, Winnipeg.

In its present form this paper owes much to the insight, clarity, ideas and editing skills of Irene Weiss, a working class woman and my companion lover, with whom I have discussed and argued class issues for many years.

## "Knowing" the Rules

Family and society teach children the values, attitudes and behaviors necessary for their survival. In the United States, these survival skills differ markedly depending upon one's class origins. In fact, class origin is the predominant factor in the development of values, attitudes and behaviors more so than religion, sex, ethnicity, education, or geographic region. Only for U.S. Jews and people of colors do religion and ethnicity modify the impact of class origins. This is so no matter how often we say or are told that we all learn "middle-class values." We are taught middle-class values, attitudes and behaviors in school, but poverty and working class children have already internalized their class values by then. Only middle-class children really learn values in school because, for them, learning and experience are congruent. The owning class, of course, is not educated in public or parochial schools. I think we can assume their education is congruent.

The owning class, those who own most of the wealth of the world, are the people who make policy. In this country, they make policy for a constitutional, capitalist, hierarchical democracy. Middle class women and men are expected to be the managers of our society, to make and enforce rules which implement the goals of the policy makers. They are expected to keep the country orderly so that business can be conducted with the least amount of interference by the workers, both the employed and the unemployed. They must set the behavioral standards most conducive to order in the society and ensure those standards are conformed to by those in their charge, the poor and working class people. Middle class people are expected to embody, in their very person, the standards that poor and working class people are supposed to emulate. To do this, middle class children are taught to respect those standards and rules. Beyond that, they are taught to respect the authority and the right of the middle class to make, to model and to enforce the rules. Therefore this respect must be internalized by the middle-class child. The middle-class child is expected, not only to conform to standards of behavior set by her class, she is also expected to conform in attitude to those standards, to believe in the intrinsic value of the standards. She is expected to experience guilt when she does not respect authority enough to conform to it. Great stress is placed on her intention when she does not conform. The question is *why* she did this or not do that. Attitudinal conformity is the goal of middle class childrearing.

and eliminated passion. This process only works when the poverty and working class women don't really care about the issue. Our attempts to modify this process to meet our needs were, and continue to be dismissed as un-feminist by those who "know."

Some middle-class feminists did try to express feelings the way they thought we did. They talked tough, yelled, made threatening gestures. We thought they were acting, were insincere, were demonstrating a different form of the intellectualizing of "I feel anger because . . ."

Women raised in crowds know how to talk loud, to yell when necessary. We learn to follow more than one conversation at a time, interrupt in order to get our two cents in. We communicate with our hands and faces too. Our language tends to be colorful and descriptive. We express ourselves differently than women who grow up in large homes, where children have their own rooms, where conversations can take place in various rooms, where the families are small and nuclear, where individuals are not competing for attention. These differences are interesting. They need not be oppressive in our groups or in our love and friendship relationships.

White middle-class women's unconscious assumption of "rightness," this arrogance, often silences poverty and working class white women and women of colors in Lesbian and feminist organizations, friendship circles and romantic love relationships. Some of us conform, agree, "pass," manipulate consciously, for our own financial, career benefit, for love and friendship. Others of us do this unconsciously, living out our internalized oppression, still hoping to become the ideal woman we've been imitating, always on edge, out of sync, afraid of being "found out" and "disgraced." The rest of us join organizations, make friends, become lovers across class lines, then argue, feel hopeful, hopeless, furious and despairing; or we give up the struggle again and again and again as matters of feminism and love move us.

## Scare City

Financially privileged people of colors and Jews know how easily racism and anti-semitism can sweep away privilege. This knowledge causes them to have some of the values, attitudes and behaviors common to people of colors and white people whose family of origin is working or poverty class. Their privilege simply allows them to live in a more "affluent neighborhood" in "Scare City, U.S.A." than the rest of us. Our

growing up is a lesson in living with scarcity (living in Scare City). For some of us, food was scarce, or clothes, or space in the bed or at the table. Some did without beds or tables. Some had just enough of everything, except maybe underwear and shoes. Some of us had parents who were skilled workers, putting money away for the rainy day, the next depression, the factory closures, the crop failure. Most lacked regular medical and dental care, did not get music or dancing lessons or go to summer camp. Some of us were in and out of foster homes, relatives' homes, reform school or juvenile hall. A lot of us did some, much or most of the care for younger siblings, the cooking, grocery-shopping, housework. If we had jobs, most of us had to give all or some of our earnings to the family. Some of our parents worked more than one job at a time, some of our mothers did ironing and child care in our home. Few of our parents did "volunteer work," unless for the church or the trade union. Our working parents usually were paid by the hour, were sometimes injured on the job, often had special work clothes or uniforms, and experienced or feared lay-offs or seasonal, intermittent or chronic unemployment. Some of us lived on welfare or "relief." Some of us stole, and so did our parents.

The fact or fear of deprivation, the experience of "never enough," of making do, of resources carefully counted, apportioned and stretched to meet needs, of limited time and space, of doing without, develops an attitude, a feeling state of scarcity that can haunt poverty and working class children all of our lives. This internalized feeling state of scarcity makes us very different from middle-class women. The difference can be described as growing up knowing there was more cake in the kitchen if you didn't want a piece at dinner, or knowing if you didn't eat it now, it would be gone. It is the difference between "there's more where that came from," and "a bare cupboard," between an internalized belief in abundance and internalized scarcity.

Women raised in "Scare City" have our own food issues to add to the issues common to all women in our country. We try to eat everything on our plates, even if we don't like it. We worry about getting enough to eat. We bring a stash of food when we attend conferences, festivals, gatherings that include meals. We feel anxious in food lines at such events, worry that the food will give out before we get our share, take less if it looks like there won't be enough for those behind us, wish the organizers would serve "family" style. When Lesbian-feminists first made vegetarianism a feminist issue, I was angry, called it a "middle-class

allegation." I know better now, but I still equate meatless meals with poverty. I've not been able to change that yet, and I suspect this attitude is underneath much of the resistance to vegetarianism in the Lesbian feminist community.

Everything relating to money and material possessions is emotionally charged for those of us who were raised in scarcity, but who live our adult lives in a middle-class environment. In our childhood and youth, we sometimes, often, or always experienced shame and humiliation about our clothes, our house, our neighborhood, especially if we had privileged friends, and/or were the "poor kids" of our high school or college. To us, even now, having the "right" clothes is so anxiety-producing that we can't bear to shop, wear the same "good" clothes for years, affect a "style" of our own, compulsively buy clothes and/or never go anywhere unless we are sure we will be properly dressed. Not to be "properly dressed" implies that we are "too poor" to wear the "right" clothes or too ignorant or have "bad taste." These are occasions of shame, to be avoided at all costs.

Of course middle-class women sometimes dress improperly for a particular event, but their embarrassment is situational, not a resurgence of internalized oppression.

Some upwardly mobile poverty and working class women are frugal to the point of stinginess. Some of us deprive ourselves of the "luxuries," like Birkenstocks or tickets to a Lesbian event in a vain attempt to have enough money in the bank to feel "secure." Others can't save, spend what we get as soon as we get it. We "know" if we don't spend it now, some family emergency will occur, mother's car or sister's teeth, and the money will be gone anyway. Others save and save and then splurge or give the money away. Sometimes we buy something, a car for example, and get one with a stick shift because it is cheaper, even though we want an automatic and even though we can afford it! Or we will buy a refrigerator without the icemaker we really want, not because it is "frivolous" or because we cannot afford it. We pull back because we feel like "spendthrifts," and that makes us feel guilty, guilty! These behaviors are mostly irrational responses to internalized oppression, to our internalized belief in scarcity. They are different from the behavior of middle-class women who are thrifty or who are simply poor money managers.

When upwardly mobile poverty and working class women need to borrow money, we resist asking middle-class friends. We know that somewhere inside middle-class women is the belief that poverty is the

fault of poor people. We don't want to risk a friendship by asking. Better to ask one of our own, who may turn us down, but won't patronize us while doing it. It would be nice if middle-class women with a friend in need would offer to help her, in a sisterly way, and save her the feeling of shame her oppression taught her.

When we lend middle-class friends small amounts of money or objects that are not expensive, books for example, and they are not returned in a timely manner, we usually are ashamed to ask for their return. Asking causes us to feel petty, small, "in need." After all, our friend treats the situation as minor, else she would return what she owes, wouldn't she? We feel ashamed that we remember the debt she has forgotten.

Women from poverty and working class families have mostly poor people or people with limited means for relatives. These kinds of people often cannot afford health or auto insurance. Their savings "for a rainy day" disappeared in the last storm. These are ordinary people whose lack of material resources escalate family problems to one family crisis after another. They expect, and usually receive, help from their upwardly mobile daughter, aunt, grandchild. It is insulting to us when middle-class women assume such families are "addicted" to crises, that they bring them on themselves. Middle-class people have their sorrows and tragedies too, but their privilege, money, connections, knowledge protects them, keeps their problems from becoming overwhelming crises.

On a related subject, the unexamined belief that formal education and intelligence are synonymous is oppressive to people denied that education by class and race oppression and is self-aggrandizing to those whose class privilege ensures an education they could not earn by intelligence. We all know the truth of this after a moment's reflection. Yet uneducated and poorly educated women continue to be objects of ridicule. Grammar and pronunciation mistakes by self-educated people cause laughter in women who are otherwise polite and sensitive. Women like myself, growing up in families or neighborhoods without educated English speakers, learned "correct," mostly accentless speech the hard way, by reading and imitation. Usually we have a reading vocabulary that is much greater than our speaking one, in part because we are unsure of the pronunciation of words. Years ago, I used the word "pseudo" in conversation with educated people, but pronounced it "swaydoe." The laughter that followed taught me to check with educated allies, though I still make mistakes and cringe at the laughter.

Money issues in inter-class Lesbian relationships can be pretty terrible, especially since the middle-class woman "knows" what is right, and her upwardly mobile companion lover cannot explain her own money behavior in rational terms. The middle-class partner "knows" that they will be able to go on the Olivia cruise, for example, if they are careful in their spending and if each saves so much a paycheck. That is how she and her family managed to take vacations regularly. Her working class partner has good intentions, but she "knows" something is bound to happen that will eat up their savings. So when she goes shopping for a Sunday brunch for friends, she buys bagels and lox, those little pastries that cost eight dollars a pound, and three bottles of nice, not "good" champagne. An argument about money will spoil that party. Also, she is proving she can afford to feed her friends "the best," and that she knows what is "the best" for brunch. Of course the working or poverty class woman will have a hard time taking her companion lover seriously, and taking her advice, when she says, "Don't worry. Everything is going to be fine," upon learning the IRS threatens to put a lien on their house. This is especially true when the former has evictions and homelessness in her past.

Another class difference related to scarcity that can cause problems in inter-class love and friendship relationships is "support." When a middle-class Lesbian expresses her support for a friend or lover, she usually does so by listening, by sympathy, by soothing, loving words, by remembering she is having a problem, asking her how she is feeling. This behavior can leave a troubled poverty or working class Lesbian feeling unloved, uncared for and unsupported. Where she grew up, "support" means sympathy, but also material help. If she's having trouble at work, she expects suggestions for solving the problem, discussions about changing her job, offers of financial assistance. If it's love problems, she expects advice, ideas to solve the problems, reminders about other women who have eyes for her. After all, that's what she gives when her lovers and friends confide their troubles to her. She knows that words are nice, but only action pays the rent! Her middle-class friends and lovers usually feel overwhelmed and unsupported by her businesslike response to their wish for sympathy and love.

Working and poverty class women worry about the finances of the organizations and groups of which we are members, while our middle-class sisters are nonchalantly ordering a better grade of paper for the flyers. Class issues of scarcity and abundance need to be discussed, in

order to have a spending policy all the women can be comfortable with. We argue with middle-class women about the need for sliding scales and fee reductions, *without* requiring proof of need (which is humiliating to women in need), and eliminating scholarships (which imply "merit," like the deserving or the smart poor) and work exchange (by which poor women do much of the work that all the women attending the event would have been obliged to share). We "know" that women who need assistance are seldom the ones who "take advantage" of financial aid.

Work itself is a class issue. Working and poverty class women "know" what work is. We saw our parents or our neighbors work or come home from work. We "know" work is physically hard, often dirty, sometimes dangerous, and always exhausting. Sometimes work is interesting, but usually it is not. Work is where you go even when you feel terrible, unless you have a job that allows sick days. Work can ruin your health and kill you. Most upwardly mobile working and poverty class women feel like frauds in our middle-class jobs. The jobs are not *really* work to us. We feel guilty about the money we make, so much more than our parents made for standing on their feet all day and taking abuse. Women like us tend to work too hard and work when we are sick. We usually do not respect middle-class women when they complain how hard their jobs are, when they stay home from work for "mental health" days. If we could overcome our prejudice and follow the example of our middle-class sisters, we might live longer, healthier lives.

Part of the problem women like myself have with work and some middle-class women is their belief that they, and their families, "worked hard," and therefore "earned" and so "deserve" the status and money and refinements they enjoy. We grew up with people who worked hard, who worked long hours, who did without things others consider necessities, who suffered and died to provide for their families. For their efforts they received little money and no refinement or status. Is this what they "earned," what they "deserved"?

When middle-class women ignore the advantages their class privilege provides, they erase the power of class oppression in their imaginations, but leave it flourishing in the material reality of poverty and working class women's lives. We all become equal in opportunity, but inferior in achievement. This erasure by middle-class feminists is particularly painful because of our continuing common struggles against the societal erasure of sexism and racism and their effects upon the aspirations and achievements of all women. We must unlearn classism and learn to

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cooperate across class lines, respectfully sharing our privilege, knowledge and experience with each other, before our actions will reflect our rhetoric. Free our sisters! Free ourselves!

### Endnote

*Works of Pain: Life in the Working Class Family*, by Lillian Breslaw Rubin, and *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, by Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb are well worth reading. For those of us who were encouraged by our teachers to "rise above our origins," *Hidden Injuries*, although written by and about boys and men, is particularly insightful. Barbara Ehrenreich's *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* is insightful about the middle class.

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# The Politics of Desire

Joanna Kadi

We have been taught many lies about class oppression, and one of the lies has to do with the meaning and existence of desire. There is a maze of confusion, denial and violence surrounding the meaning of desire in its larger sense and in its connection to class oppression. As a working-class lesbian, I perceive desire to be about unsatisfied longings of all kinds—physical, emotional, political, sexual, spiritual. And yet the current meaning is extremely narrow, pertaining to desire as sexual intimacy. Few ask whose definition this is and who gains from such a restrictive interpretation; most lesbians writing about desire are not among those few. While valuable insights have resulted from current lesbian discourses on desire as sexual intimacy, my perception is middle-class lesbians are doing this work without a class analysis.

Had lesbian discourse on desire been shaped by working-class lesbians, I believe we would have come forth with a wider definition examining and interpreting desire as it relates to such things as material security, educational opportunities, ability to participate, nice clothes, respectful treatment, time and freedom to create ideas and movements, sexual intimacy. Working-class lesbians have many gifts to offer, and one of these is understanding issues in their most basic, practical sense as well as their aesthetic, philosophical sense. This way of perceiving the world allows for the kind of global, multi-level awareness necessary at this critical time in our history.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I want to set up a framework to define some terms and concepts relating to class oppression generally, examine desire as a political issue, and then name some of my desires as they relate to lesbian communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Binder helped me clarify the ideas in this introduction. I would like to thank her for that, and for all the help she gave me with this essay.

## Working-Class Oppression

When I did the emotional/analytical work necessary to understand class oppression, I finally understood how class oppression had impinged on every aspect of my life and stopped me at every turn. I understood the practical ways class oppression manifested itself—being overcome with feelings of self-hatred and worthlessness while shopping at 'smart' clothing stores. Being unable to speak in a university classroom. Enduring a four-day-long anxiety attack precipitated by a computer taking up residence in my living-room. Feeling enraged when someone presumes I am middle class. What accompanied these incidents were old feelings of powerlessness and resignation that indicated a general sense of internalized oppression.

And because the term 'internalized oppression' was not precise enough, I began to search for words to describe what happened to me because of these experiences, words to describe the inner acceptance and resignation of myself as a person who had come to believe oppressive treatment is her due. And to look for words to describe the person who is resisting such treatment and coming back to herself. These are the words I found: *the conquered self/the conquest of the self*.<sup>2</sup>

*The conquered self* is, I believe, a term that speaks directly to the horrendous and violent effects of internalized oppression. The conquered self accepts oppressive acts as the normal course of life, and/or comes to believe she deserves them. The word 'conquered' implies an act of successful domination requiring forethought and intent on the part of the oppressor. The word 'self' indicates that the mind, body, and spirit of a person is affected. And the conquered self is not hidden but rather revealed in many ways: the heavy shoulders and downcast eyes, the quickness of self-deprecating remarks, the silence, the slumped posture, the creeping steps, the casually spoken phrase "I hate my body," the refusal to fight, the acceptance of abuse.

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<sup>2</sup>Katie G. Cannon, Associate Professor of Ethics at the Episcopal Divinity School of Cambridge, Mass., and author of *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), encouraged me to create such a concept during her time as my advisor. Without her encouragement, I would not have ventured to attempt such a thing. I would like to express my gratitude for all the support and affirmation she has given me.

In hopeful contrast to this is *the conquest of the self*, which describes the successful process of a vigorous, determined struggle to win back what was taken—one's personhood. It indicates that I can leave oppression behind and move toward liberation, and that physical and psychic resistance are possible. I have discovered five elements necessary for the conquest of my self. These are: re-remembering and re-claiming my individual and collective history; formulating and acting on a political analysis; finding a community which will help me name my self, find my voice, and work toward revolution(s); allowing repressed feelings to surface; articulating and transforming the belief systems left behind by the oppressors.<sup>3</sup>

I cannot examine each of these concepts in this paper because of space limitations, but do want to discuss my definition of belief systems. (Later I will discuss the issues of finding community and allowing repressed feelings to surface.) Belief systems are an indicator of oppression, as are such things as self-hatred, body language, depression, addiction, ignorance of one's history, self-mutilation and hysteria.<sup>4</sup> Belief systems are internalized justifications for constant oppressive experiences, mind-sets developed to rationalize day-to-day abuse. They are brief, telling statements, signposts of oppression and defeat, that explain the position of the self in relation to oppression. 'You are nothing in this world without money' was Cy-Thea Sand's first lesson of life in the working-class neighbourhood of Verdun, Quebec.<sup>5</sup> It was a belief system by which her family lived.

These concepts and terms helped provide a framework for understanding the impact of class oppression. They also allowed me to move further afield in the exploration of other issues relating to class, such as desire.

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<sup>3</sup>I examine each of these concepts in detail in my master's thesis, *Searching for Words, Searching for Knowledge*, Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, April 1990.

<sup>4</sup>When I use the word *hysteria*, I use it in the Freudian sense of a person experiencing symptoms of a physical illness which cannot be traced to a physical cause.

<sup>5</sup>Cy-Thea Sand. "A Question of Identity," *Fireweed. A Feminist Quarterly*, #25, Toronto, Fall 1987, pp. 55 and 57.

## Analyzing Desire

We have been taught many lies about class oppression, and one of the lies has to do with the meaning and existence of desire. There is a maze of confusion, denial and violence surrounding the meaning of desire in its larger sense and in its connection to class oppression. And this helps explain why I never knew my own heart's desires. It explains why I needed to analyze what happened early in my life to stop my heart's desires from taking shape. As I did so, I uncovered (some of) the politics of desire.

### The Stunting of Desire

I do not believe capitalism could succeed if working-class people were in touch with our deepest, most authentic desires. I do believe capitalism succeeds in large part because the ruling class contains and constrains the desires and dreams of the working class. Numerically, working-class, working-poor and poor people constitute the vast majority of people in this world. If we were aware of our heart's desires and acted to birth them into reality, I believe revolution(s) would begin. Yet I believe it is safe to say few of us know our heart's desire. And there are concrete, political reasons that explain this. It is not merely an interesting fact that a working-class girl dreams of becoming a secretary when she grows up while her middle-class friend is planning to enter law school. It is a predictable outcome of the politics of desire. I now want to name four ways in which my life as a working-class woman was set up to insure I would not want to move beyond my designated social place.

First, desires are inevitably stunted when a person is engaged in a battle for survival. Dreams are a luxury when survival is at stake, and mine was. Enduring the racism and classism directed at my family and the abuse to which I was subjected at home was the focus of my childhood and adolescence. It was neither the time nor the place for dreams. As Amanda King, a mill worker in North Carolina, notes: "It wasn't like we all sat around and talked and thought about what we'd do whenever we grew up. We were just trying to survive."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>In, Victoria Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, Cornell Univ., 1986), p. 194.

I could explain this point differently by noting that for many working-class people, nightmares hold a more prominent place than dreams. Cy-Thea Sand writes:

In our nightmares, poverty and hardship are main characters. In our nightmares, we do not move far from the parameters of a mental world created for us when we were too young to alter the scenery. We were surrounded by adults in despair, parents immobilized by fear, adults treading the narrowness of their possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

Nightmares are bound to be prevalent for a group experiencing the violence/violations of the capitalist system on a daily basis. I did not realize how completely the spectre of poverty haunted me until I attempted to leave my abusive husband after coming out as a lesbian. Although I wanted the abuse to stop and I wanted to live as a lesbian, I did not want to be poor, as all the single women I knew growing up had been. Only after I accepted that I would be poor but that poverty was preferable to marriage, heterosexuality and abuse could I leave.<sup>8</sup>

Second, restricted physical space and location limit a person's dreams. Amount of living space, travel opportunities and the distance involved, assumptions about where children will live when they grow up all impacted me. I lived with my family of origin in a small house where I had no privacy. The neighbours' houses were close to ours and my extended family lived within a few blocks. I could not see myself moving easily through and into the wider world because the space around me was so small. I could not see myself moving easily through and into the wider world because the adults around me did not have the power to provide models of how to do that.

Third, lack of visible resources for making dreams come true stunts desire. These resources include role models, money, an ability to network with influential people, and attitudes of entitlement. If my parents had had money, if there had been a lawyer in the family, if some of my parents' friends had been lawyers, if other people in my extended family had graduated from university, if my family had had connections with lawyers and with university graduates on a regular basis, if my parents

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<sup>7</sup>Cy-Thea Sand. "Editorial," *Fireweed. A Feminist Quarterly*, #25, Toronto, Fall 1987, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup>I did not live in poverty when I left my husband.

had assumed their children would attend university and then launch careers, I probably would have wanted to become a lawyer. As Lillian Breslow Rubin points out, middle-class children know they can dream because there are resources all around them to help their dreams come true.<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, being surrounded by a grim historical reality stems the flow of desire. My struggle with survival was mirrored by stories of the poverty my family had experienced one and two generations before. The stories were borne out in the illiteracy of grandparents, the decrepit apartments of great-uncles, my father's adolescent struggle with tuberculosis. The stark reality of their experiences impinged on what I could envision for myself.

In connection with that fourth point, it seems a common dream of an older, working-class generation is to hope their children and grandchildren will have a better life than they did. This was true in my case. Other working-class women recount similar experiences. Millworker Annie Viola Fries said her mother would have been "thrilled to death" if any of her children had received an education.<sup>10</sup> One group of women interviewed hoped their daughters would not marry as young as they had.<sup>11</sup> What is sad about these dreams is not only how small they are, but the underlying assumption that it was no use for these women to dream for themselves—they knew their lives would not get any better.

It is important to point out that dreams and the politics of desire are large issues, and my discussion is necessarily limited. We need to hear from many working-class lesbians. Some built grandiose dreams as a welcome escape from harsh reality. Others created powerful dreams they kept alive against all odds. Some had none. In my own case, I managed to create three small dreams that accurately reflect some of my life's reality.

The first dream was almost a negative desire in that I hoped not too many bad things would happen to me. In particular, I hoped employment would not be a 'choice' between factory worker, prostitute or cleaning woman.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Lillian Breslow Rubin. *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 38.

<sup>10</sup>Byerly, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup>Rubin, p. 113.

<sup>12</sup>I also hoped that no family members would become addicted to drugs. It is obvious this dream would never come to pass, given the way drugs are pushed by the ruling class into working-class communities.

My second dream was one of escaping. Escaping the general motors city, the abusive parents, the small house where I could never be alone. The backdrop for this dream was that no one had escaped. The backdrop for this dream was that I had pitifully few resources to make the dream happen. The backdrop for this dream was that it was too weak to contradict my other belief that I would never get out of my home town.<sup>13</sup>

My third dream came to the fore during eight months of factory work, although it had always been present in my family's collective unconscious. I hoped I would not get hurt too badly at work. During my time<sup>14</sup> at a non-unionized factory, it was an ever-present prayer. Out of the eight women—half of us women of colour—who worked at the plant, four were seriously hurt during the six weeks I worked there. One had acid splashed in her eye (she had already lost the other eye); another woman miscarried after constant work on a machine that emitted poisonous fumes. One burned her neck severely, and a fourth received a severe burn to the hand, resulting in neurological damage and scar tissue, after touching a red-hot coil which the company insisted did not need a protective cap. My closest call occurred the day a fire started on top of the piece of machinery on which I welded. The machine was hidden in a corner and could only be reached by crawling over several large objects. I put the fire out, crawled away, and reported it to the boss. He told me he hoped I would not get electrocuted when I turned the machine back on, since I had used water instead of sand to extinguish the fire, and returned to his deskwork. The terror I felt during those few minutes was no greater than the terror I felt every day. I experienced that degree of terror because six weeks is not a long enough period of time to numb out, which is what other workers must do every day.

### I Can Have That

There was a belief system that grew from these circumstances, and it was 'You can't have that.' This went so deep that even when material circumstances changed, it did not. During the years I was married to a white middle-class man who earned a good salary, I never wanted to buy anything. During my first years of work as a political activist, I

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<sup>13</sup>I was not alone in this dream. See, for example, Sand, "A Question of Identity," p. 55.

<sup>14</sup>This phrase, which is often used by working-class people to describe their jobs, is also the phrase used to describe jail time. I see this as significant.

hoped for and envisioned small bits of social change, pockets of improvement, but never a complete overturning of society. 'You can't have that' was at work through all of this. The phrase covered whole areas of life: material things, meaningful work, community, revolution(s), sexual intimacy.

And when the time came to change the belief system, I had to do many things. The conquest of the self involves reclaiming and remembering history, formulating and acting on a political analysis, getting in touch with repressed feelings, finding community, and changing belief systems. Here I will examine the issues of connecting with repressed feelings and finding community.

To get in touch with my feelings, I pushed through layer after layer of numbness and frozenness. The first feelings were pain, sadness, grief. How pain-full to remember my self as an eight-year-old girl knowing I had the 'wrong' clothes, being laughed at and humiliated for the shabby, over-large winter coat I wore for several years. How pain-full to remember the self that was so defeated she did not, could not want a different coat. After the feelings of pain surfaced, I begin to feel anger at the unfairness, at the oppression, at the exploitation. After years of numb depression, I am elated to feel anger, and I cling to it tightly. The anger led me to the next feeling, which is desire. Desire for material things, for those nice clothes I never had, for revolution(s), for a full, full life. All of these desires must be taken seriously; it is tempting for my self as a radical political activist aware of global injustice to affirm my desire for revolution(s) but trivialize my desire for nice clothes.<sup>15</sup>

These feelings helped me become aware that one of my heart's desires is for community. Community where I can bring all parts of my self—my identity as a woman, a lesbian, a woman of colour,<sup>16</sup> a working-class person. Movements for social change have allowed me to find these sisters. I wonder now if one of the most important aspects of any liberation movement is helping us discover each other. Having supportive community allows me to dream, allows me to understand and shape

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<sup>15</sup>While I do not want to trivialize my desire for clothes, neither do I want to emulate the worst of middle-class consumerism.

<sup>16</sup>While this article is focussed on classism, it is worth noting that the reason so many of us who are working-class are also people of colour is because of the way racism and classism work hand-in-hand in a white-supremacist, capitalist society.

my heart's desires with people who care about me and the world. These women and I work together, we play together, we are political activists together, we are dreamers together. They encourage me to dream and to desire, and at times when I could not dream, they dreamed for me. And so I am able to begin to form my individual dreams and desires, and we are able to form our collective dreams and desires. And because we dream together we dream far more powerfully. Because we desire together we desire far more powerfully. We understand resistance more fully because we know that our wild dreams, our full-blown heart's desires, are as much a part of the resistance as the marches, the protests, the educating.

As I fight to reach the place where I have reclaimed and won back my self, I change the belief system imprinted on my conquered self by my oppressors. I practice saying it, I write it down, my friends repeat it in various ways, my actions assure me of its validity. 'I can have that. I deserve it.'

## Lesbians, Desire and Class

Some lesbians are already engaged in actively resisting class oppression, some will choose to begin to do so, and others will not. It is crucial for anyone doing the work to have the kind of community support just described. It is also crucial to do the work fully cognizant of one's particular class location, and to acknowledge our differences. For example, my new belief system ('I can have that. I deserve it.') may not be appropriate for upper-middle class lesbians attempting to curb the sense of entitlement instilled in them since birth. The more we understand the politics of desire, the more readily we can actualize our dreams for the future.

When I pondered my desires in terms of lesbian communities, I realized that only after I believed I had a right to want these things could I articulate my desires to participate, be taken seriously, (help) create our movements.

I want to participate in lesbian cultural/political events. A simple desire, and yet often so unfulfilled. Why?

Physical and material considerations are part of the explanation. Events inaccessible by public transportation, in upper-middle class sections of town, in university auditoriums, preclude working-class

participation, as does cost.<sup>17</sup> The cost of many lesbian festivals, concerts and other gatherings is prohibitive and no sliding scale is offered. If one is, it may begin at an unaffordable price. Other groups ask for a donation of \$5 (or some amount) but more than once I have contributed what I could and then been told what the 'price' was. Now when I see the words 'donation requested' I telephone to make sure that is true. I resent having to take what should be an unnecessary action, and know many working-class lesbians would not feel comfortable doing so. The last time I called a radical lesbian feminist organization in this regard, I was told its event cost \$5. After my repeating the wording of the poster, the lesbian said "Well, if you REALLY can't afford \$5, I suppose we would take less." I did not attend that event. Having been humiliated all my life in a society that despises working-class and poor people, I now do things to avoid being humiliated. Sometimes this means staying home when lesbian events are happening.

Moreover, being able to pay, arrive by a suitable mode of transportation, and feel comfortable in the room does not ensure participation. It may only ensure working-class lesbians sit silently while middle-class lesbians give their opinions and ask their questions. This happens because of unspoken assumptions governing lesbian events. Some of these are: we speak a common language, we understand the language used, we are equally able to speak, we feel comfortable enough to speak, we share common knowledge. Often these assumptions are erroneous and class-based, as this example shows. After discussing an event we had attended (I had not participated), a lesbian laughed at me, saying she could not believe I was unaware Gertrude Stein was a lesbian. What is significant here, besides the blatant classism, is that I had asked if Gertrude Stein was a lesbian when my real question was, "Who is Gertrude Stein?" But I had already inferred that would be an impossible question, so I had tried to 'pass' by asking if Stein was a lesbian. At how many lesbian events are working-class lesbians coerced into passing as middle-class?<sup>18</sup>

This inability to participate affects my connections with lesbians. I may choose to end a relationship with a lesbian who will not examine/change her behavior. I often feel cynical and hostile, wondering

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<sup>17</sup>Some lesbians believe the issue of money has been more than adequately discussed, but if this is correct, then the discussions have not impacted our actions.

when we are going to get it right. How will revolution(s) happen when we cannot understand the concept of a \$5 donation?  
 When participation is truly an option, I am deeply touched. Recently I attended events for Lesbian and Gay Awareness Week in Ann Arbor, Michigan. This week of activities offered cultural/political/educational events, including workshops, a poetry reading, march and rally, dance, coffeehouse, slide show. Everything was free.<sup>19</sup> I was excited and hopeful about this. What would it be like if this was commonplace, if I could simply know that when lesbian events were happening, my desire to participate would be fulfilled?

My second desire is to be taken seriously. I am grateful to Sarah Lucia Hoagland for naming and defining this concept in her excellent book, *Lesbian Ethics*,<sup>20</sup> as it is something I have long felt but been unable to articulate. I have rarely experienced middle-class lesbians taking me seriously.<sup>21</sup> In the examples listed below, I had made it clear I am working-class (although whether I was heard is debatable). I have been ignored in conversations about class being held by middle-class lesbians who either did not notice or care about my silence. I have been told by middle-class women that our class backgrounds are similar. I have listened to women make sweeping generalizations about middle-class experiences we all shared. I have been disbelieved and told I am not working-class, for reasons ranging from completing my master's degree to having more money than a middle-class woman at one point. This disbelief is a precise illustration of an oppressor group doing the defining.

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<sup>18</sup>In regard to passing, working-class lesbians have another gift to offer. We are the ones with the experience of having to pass as middle-class, and so we are well-suited to doing a crucial piece of theoretical work—analyzing passing as a survival strategy of certain oppressed groups.

<sup>19</sup>In a rare turn of events, the activities were mostly subsidized by the University of Michigan; the organizing committee only had to raise a small portion of the money. Donations were requested at each event, but not in a way that would make people feel ashamed if they couldn't give. Obviously university funding is not an option for most of our events.

<sup>20</sup>Sarah Lucia Hoagland. *Lesbian Ethics* (Palo Alto, CA: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988), pp. 194-5.

<sup>21</sup>I doubt upper-class lesbians take working-class lesbians seriously, but have not had enough experience with them to write about it. That is why this discussion is focussed on experiences I have had with middle-class lesbians.

for the oppressed group, and a way for middle-class lesbians to avoid dealing with class privilege.

Recently I had a dream in which a white, middle-class lesbian repeated a phrase only a person with middle-class experiences would understand. She kept insisting I knew the meaning of the phrase, although I told her I did not, and finally I ended the interaction by walking away from her. That incident is an example of the kind of pressure I feel from middle-class lesbians who want me to tell them I really am part of their group and our experiences really are similar.

What I want in such interactions is to be believed, listened to respectfully, and noticed, whether speaking or silent. I want my words critically analyzed, not trivialized or agreed with in a casual manner. I want the points at which our experiences disconnect to be examined and honoured, not glossed over lightly and then dismissed. All of these would indicate I am being taken seriously.

Repeated experiences of not being taken seriously have, on one hand, silenced me and stopped me from contributing. On the other hand, I am now careful to seek out friends and allies who will take me seriously. I also realize that because of internalized oppression, I often do not take myself seriously, and am attempting to change that.

My third desire is for working-class lesbians to (help) create our liberation movements. I am aware working-class lesbians have been involved from the beginning; what I mean is that I have rarely seen any portion of our movements solely created by working-class lesbians. Rather I have experienced working-class lesbians (and/or lesbians of colour) first ignored when present and then 'added in' to groups already functioning with middle-class values and procedures. I have an intense desire to know what a music festival, community, gathering, publication, planned and carried out by working-class lesbians, would look like. What would an authentic working-class creation be?

The closest I have come to this was as a member of a group of four working-class women (two lesbians, two heterosexuals) in graduate school, meeting weekly to reflect on and evaluate our work. The group had tremendous abilities to hold each other's realities,<sup>22</sup> laugh, offer

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<sup>22</sup>Katie Cannon articulated and defined this phrase. It refers to the ability to listen attentively to another's story, affirm her reality, not try to rescue her or give false assurances, and to generally be present in an authentic way.

support, and understand the constant class attacks<sup>23</sup> we experienced. As more of us who are working class become aware of and resist class oppression wherever it happens, I believe there will be more opportunities for creating groups and projects that are authentically working class.

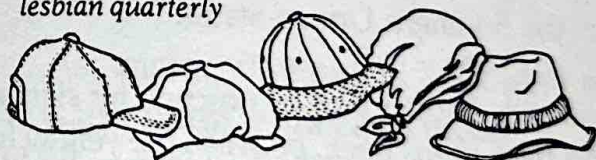
I lived for many years believing 'I can't have that,' a testimony to the success of the ruling class. I did not have much and I did not want more. But things changed. I became a political activist, found a community and engaged in the emotional/analytical work necessary to understand class oppression. And I began to know my heart's desires, to trust in them, to actualize some of them. I began to believe 'I can have that. I deserve it.'

This story has meaning beyond my life. Resisting class oppression is central to our political struggle, and understanding class dynamics is central to strengthening lesbian communities. Knowing/creating our heart's desires is central to our liberation.

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<sup>23</sup>We used the phrase 'class attack' to refer to the feelings of panic, insecurity, self-hatred, powerlessness and confusion that result from a working-class person experiencing some aspect of class oppression in a particularly vivid way.

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# Whenever I Tell You the Language We Use is a Class Issue, You Nod Your Head in Agreement —And Then You Open Your Mouth

*Elliott*

## 1. I Never Have Understood Why You Think It's Ok . . .

*Redneck*: n. slang 1. A member of the white rural laboring class, esp. in the Southern United States.

My father is a redneck, Scotch-Irish by descent, his skin as naturally pale as my own, the back of his neck, between the yellow hard hat and the light blue Big Mac workshirt, is always red, burned through so many summers that it barely fades in winter.

My mother is not a redneck, much to my father's family's horror. From a small Portuguese immigrant community in central Illinois, hers is the first generation born entirely in the u.s. Her skin—already suspiciously dark for a real white woman—grows only darker in the sun.

I was born to be redneck—white, rural, working poor. If not for my asthma, my Dyke-hood, my first womanlove who carefully taught me what she called culture and what I now call passing, self-hate, and assimilation, I'd be a redneck now. Instead I've moved from rural working poor to urban working poor; my neck isn't red, and because of this I often pass, especially when I keep my swearing, my snide outsider's humor and my colorful birth language hidden. And even when I'm not passing, most of the dykes around me are entirely too polite to call me a redneck, at least to my face.

But while my neck isn't red, my eyes often are, from working in front of computer screens under fluorescent lights. Sometimes I wonder if

you'd get it if I called myself that—Redeye—or we called ourselves Soreback or Brown-lunged or Pesticide-poisoned. Usually I think you wouldn't; we'd still be a "them" and you still wouldn't try to understand us. I can imagine this conversation:

*Middle-class White Good Hearted Liberal (or even Radical) Lesbian Feminist:* What are we going to do about the women in the pink collar ghetto? Those offices are poisoning them, and they're begin exploited!

*Another of the Same:* Why would you worry about them? They wouldn't support you anyway. Why bother? They're just a bunch of redeyes!

I have a couple questions for you middle and upper class wimmin, especially white wimmin. Do all of you who use "redneck" know that it was invented by the white Southern ruling class? I hope you don't, or my next question will be much harder—why do you think it's ok to identify with that class by using this word as a putdown, often as the ultimate insult?

2. "But, but . . . . (stammer, stammer) . . . I didn't mean to offend you! I was just using redneck to mean . . . ." Or (whispered), "Did you hear that?! She just admitted that she's a redneck!"

*Redneck* n. 2. Offensive slang. A person who advocates a provincial, conservative, often bigoted sociopolitical attitude considered characteristic of a redneck.

When I was young I often spent weekends at my mother's parents' house. There, on Saturday nights, we'd go to Spatz's, where they made their own ice cream fresh every day. There's a family story about the place—I remember hearing it over and over when I was little, always told by my mom in a proud voice. The story happened in the late 50s, when civil rights court cases were challenging segregation and in response some businesses were integrating and others were prohibiting Blacks explicitly for the first time.

Yet, as clear as the setting is in my memory, I can't for the life of me remember how the story goes past this. I have two versions of it in my memory and no way to know which is real. The first version goes like this: Spatz's, which had always served Blacks, if less than politely, was ordered to stop doing so by a reactionary town council law. They cunningly got around this attempt to control their business, however, through some trick like having Black customers tell what they wanted to white customers who would then say it to the server, take it from the server, and pass it on. The second version is basically just the opposite: Spatz's, which had never served Blacks, was ordered to do so by the town council. They cunningly got around this attempt to control their business, however, through some trick like only serving people the wait staff would claim to know.

When I think of the story now I would really like to believe the first version—it would make writing this so simple. I could then record it and say, "Look, your stereotypes about rednecks are wrong and here's why." The truth of course is so much more complicated.

Ya see, the pride in my mom's voice, the laughter of whoever was hearin<sup>1</sup> the story, wasn't about defeating or upholding racism. Not that she didn't enjoy perpetuating hate with the openness learned from being herself very poor and not quite white enough—no middle class polite pretensions in her speech. But for her, for my people, the point of the story was that the little family owned business managed to screw the rich guys using only their wit; no money, no lawyers, no laws, things Spatz's had no reason to trust anyway. The story's lesson is that the system is the enemy, and our heroes were individuals who screwed the system:

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<sup>1</sup>If you notice, there is neither a "g" nor an apostrophe here. The "g" is absent because this is the way I talk, sometimes dropping final consonants, especially when I'm talkin most like myself and least like the middle-class people I usta model myself after. The apostrophe is absent because it implies that something is missing; it's a grammatical mark used to show dialect or deviance from "standard" english, and although, much to my delight, many things about me are deviant, my language is not one of them. I don't know why the middle class white dykes around me think that spoken French, which drops many of its written letters, is elegant while looking at me in horror, or treating me as less intelligent, when I drop sounds unnecessary to meaning. If you don't believe me, try holding a conversation with acadykes while dropping final letters (oh, and swearing a bit, too). You'll soon find them interrupting and ignoring you. Great fun.

Spatz's, the workers at the union-busting plant who threw glass into the salad dressing and shut the lines down for weeks the farmers who took weapons to auctions for foreclosed farms so no one would outbid the family that owned the place, the woman who found a way to stick it to her cheating or violent husband.

I learned this lesson, and it's kept me safe many times. My middle and upper class friends constantly surprise me with how they had to learn that the system was fucked and with how often they forget this. I'm not surprised that I went from first reading feminist ideas to being a radical feminist/Separatist within a few months; when I first read *Gyn/Ecology* I was appalled but not surprised. I already knew what the medical system had done to my family, and once I got that the individual cheating and violent husbands were actually their own system, I was on my way.

I have this theory, although I can't prove it, that at the beginning of this wave of Women's Liberation it was working class wimmin and dykes who insisted that feminist power structures *had* to be different, and that they knew this not so much from a belief in inherently nurturing women and inherently violent men as from deep and clear personal experience with the u.s. caste systems of class and race. Once the middle class white women took over, this knowledge was thrown out, and so, eventually, was the commitment to new ways of organizing. The result is disasters like having Take Back the Night marches run by city governments or this summer's National Women's Studies Association conference.<sup>2</sup>

Whether it's true historically or not, I'm now constantly surrounded by middle and upper class wimmin who can't or won't understand the lies of their privilege. For the inability or unwillingness to change they often have a long justification which boils down to: "These kinds of systems of power have been abusive because men have been using them but with us women it will be different." I encounter this in all my communities, the magical "us" which is meant to hide class just as surely as it is meant to hide race.

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<sup>2</sup>In Milwaukee, WI, a city office runs the march which is now basically a Sunday afternoon tea protesting violence against people. And my favorite story from NWSA, via Lee Evans, is how, during one of the meetings about whether or not their constitution allowed them to have meetings, one black woman stood up and said that we needed to toss the rules since they obviously weren't working and was silenced by being told she was out of order.

Not that all of us white dykes who are rednecks, white trash, working stiffs, factory or office girls have nearly all the answers, either. My heritage was to hate all outsiders—and, as part of that, to fear them. My job now is to take that apart, to interrupt and unlearn the racism and anti-Semitism and to pull from the overpowering hate of the system the knowledge and rage so that I can act as well as feel. And to change the most dangerous lie of my class, that we fight only as individuals and only for ourselves. Socialist intellectuals call the breaking of this isolation “class consciousness”—I call it taking my values of sticking up for and sticking with Family and using them for the complex groups of communities that sustain me and that I in turn sustain. Without dyke communities I’d be up shit creek without a paddle—but without us working class girls’ outsiders’ knowledge<sup>3</sup> and our commitment to staying with our people even when we’re fighting, these same communities would be heading for the falls without a paddle too.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. I Hate “Nice”!

*Redneck*: n. as used by most of the dykes around me: 1. Any person who is racist, violent, uneducated and stupid (as if they are the same thing), womon-hating, gay-bashing, X-tian fundy, etc. 2. Used as a synonym for every type of oppressive belief except classism.<sup>5</sup>

A while back a lover and I were catching a ride to the peace camp with a lesbian couple, in the back of the new mini-van they had purchased just for their summer traveling, and we were talking about working with/for battered women. One of the lesbians—Muffy, we called her—talked about where she lived in Key West and how blatant the womon-hating was there. Just as I was thinking, “Oh, yeah, the

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<sup>3</sup>So, you think it’s an accident that some of our best thinking and writing about therapism, the diseasing of our communities, consumerism and such is by working class dykes?

<sup>4</sup>And to take this metaphor a bit further—I’ve gotten used to wading through shit. What are you going to do?

<sup>5</sup>Which I would think all the Daly fans who go on and on about reversals would have noticed and understood before this.

privileged on vacation!" Muffy added, "Not that that's surprising, because they're all a bunch of truck-driving rednecks." I instantly wanted to scream (well, actually I wanted to use an icy, cold, calm, distancing, devastating tone, but knew I'd scream if I opened my mouth at all), "Oh yes, I know exactly what you mean. And how very lucky for Hedda and Lisa that Joel Steinberg was a lawyer and not a truck driver."

But right then I said nothing, because I didn't think Muffy or her lover would get it and because my upper middle class lover gave me one of her "oh god" looks which I knew meant she recognized that I was upset but didn't understand it as important enough to make a point of. Looking back, I suspect Muffy's lover was passing just as much as I was, but we made no eye contact, no dangerous alliance, and so both sat thoroughly silenced by the combination of intimacy and privilege. Of course, these types of privileged, arrogant, world-owning statements (when made by lesbians I'm not close to) can silence me as well; this particularly frustrates me among Separatists, where often the dykes I disagree with most are the ones I'm least able to challenge.<sup>6</sup>

I could go on for pages about such stupid comments and the snide-  
assed responses I made or wish I had, since I'm surrounded by dykes who know nothing about my life but constantly reduce it to stereotypes they don't even understand. One example, the thing that has made me most angry this week, is when lesbians who don't even know who Tammy Wynette is spit out sentences with these key phrases: "... country-western music ... stand by your man ... redneck." Let me say this now, before I meet you at some conference and feel like screaming at you. Country music is not simplistic, and it is not a joke. There are plenty of "that broad is mine" songs and "give everything to your man" songs (which are, I'm sure, much more dangerous to women than the way opera, theater and musicals romanticize rape and battering); there are also wimin's love songs to their mothers, grandmothers, sisters and daughters which celebrate and teach strength, resistance, self-love and, of course, how to screw the system.

And I could go on and on, selling (curious word, that) you country music by downplaying its weaknesses and bragging on its strengths. But my music, even the whole of my culture, isn't the point of this essay. The point is that I shouldn't have this feeling of trying to justify myself, to prove the value of my world. All of you should already get the ties between privilege, ignorance, and stereotypes. Instead, I encounter stuff

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<sup>6</sup>Yet.

like these recent informal survey results: every single lesbian I talked to who claimed that she absolutely hated all country music was middle or upper class. What these wimmin knew about country music could be reduced to the litany of "... stand by your man ... redneck ...". Surely you all know by now that your class training taught you lies about all people, including us poor white girls. I know that you learned we are dirty and stupid and bigots and sluts and so on. I would like to trust that you know these images are not related at all to my truths about my life. In fact, I often feel stupid writing and saying these things, for surely all of you advanced lesbian feminists and dyke Separatists understand the means and ends of the socialization process. But then I hold a conversation with one of you and realize that no matter what anti-classist statements your mouth might utter, I can't trust that your brain or lesbian sensibilities are attached to it.<sup>7</sup> Don't you yet get that you don't know us working class wimmin in all of our many differences, from you and from each other, and that your lack of knowledge is about privilege? And don't you yet get that every time you use a word like *redneck* or *white trash* or *hick* or *midwestern* as insulting adjectives you push yourselves further from us, put a barrier between us, make our dreams of lesbian communities a bit more impossible?

I've stopped working on this and tossed it aside four or five times now. I can't quite convince myself that these things are worth saying, that anyone, even another working class dyke, is going to listen to me defend the word *redneck*.<sup>8</sup> Ya-all are so sure that the word is a synonym for all you claim to hate most (in yourselves?) that I know damn well some of you won't even be able to process what I'm saying, and let me tell you, this conviction of yours scares me, cause the way you say stuff makes me believe that your plan for getting rid of lesbian-bashing and womon-hating and racism is to get rid of my kind of people—as if eliminating rednecks would stop, let's say, the rich white men who set Nestles' third world policy. Now I know you well enough to know that right now your little mind is going, "but that is not what I meant." It is, however, what

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<sup>7</sup>Maybe that's why you have what I regard as the social impairment of not being able to talk and listen at the same time, because your class training never encouraged you, as women, to connect your brain and mouth.

<sup>8</sup>Which is where my culture of resistance comes in handy, cause I just start singing "Coat of Many Colors" or "The Ballad of Hee Haw" or "Take This Job and Shove It" and then I'm ready for the next round.

you say, and where I come from we mean what we say to each other. I wanna rant for about twenty more pages, building my anger and my examples until I fully believe myself and you get this in your gut and not just your theory center. Of course, I know that the way to be taken most seriously by most of my contemporaries is to have long cool philosophical arguments for my position, but I don't wanna be passing here; for a change, I want to be taken seriously on my own terms, cussing, metaphors, and original grammatic constructions and all.

A fuller list of these terms would be a whole nother paper. But here's a few so ya get the general idea. First off, if you want to give examples of cultural sexism or some such, use your own damn culture, not mine or anyone else's; the last thing any wimmin need is to have outsiders telling each other about what our lives mean. And don't ever interrupt what I'm saying to correct my pronunciation. That's so fucking condescending and besides, with the linguistic ties between "hillbilly dialects" and early modern english, the way I say it might be historically more accurate anyhow. Stop blabbing on and on about stuff you don't know, especially when you're around me and what you're mouthing is socialist intellectual theory about *the* urban working class. And anytime you think that a working class dyke is being rude or impolite, examine what you "know" about manners. Maybe you haven't yet considered that what you learned about manners making social interactions smoother or easier is a crock of bull. Manners are just the way you learned to identify each other and to brand outsiders. If, through your social skills and politeness, you have the ability to make any of us feel comfortable, realize that we know you also have the skills and tools to make us feel uncomfortable and that we've seen you use them in this way even if you don't think you ever have. As part of this, just stop being nice or worrying about being nice. I hate nice. I especially hate being silenced by all those nice ways you have of shutting out everything you can't or don't want to recognize. We don't need any more nice, any more social rules. We need communities that are serious about understanding and meeting the needs of lesbians.

I don't think that meeting needs instead of throwing tea socials is a new idea. But as I sit here, wearing used clothes and typing on a used typewriter, I know that my world isn't about new; it's about available, usable, comfortable, and long-lasting. And that's exactly how this redneck girl wants her dyke families and communities—available, comfortable, and long-lasting.

# LESY—Adelaide: An Example of a Lesbian Economy\*

*Carole Young*

The idea of a lesbian economy is not a new one. Being tied into the heteropatriarchal economy is a major factor in keeping us from taking control of our lives. In Adelaide, South Australia, we have set up a non-dollar based lesbian economy based on the pooling and sharing of our resources.

It started when I read an article about an exchange system called the LETS system that has been operating in Canada and Australia and which I thought would suit a lesbian community. LETS is a bartering system whereby you can get goods or services in exchange for an agreed unit of value. These units are called by whatever name you wanted to give them, for example "points" or "lemons." So for example I could get a haircut from another member in exchange for X points which would then be credited to her account and charged against mine. She could get a massage from another member in exchange for Y points, and so on. The values would be determined by the individual members by negotiation. No actual dollars are involved, but there is an accounting system.

I decided to take the idea to my own lesbian community and see whether it would work. I called a meeting to put forward the idea. On the morning of the meeting, however, when I was sitting down to write out a short description of how the system would work, I realized that I had some underlying discomfort about the LETS system. Firstly, although it was supposedly not based on a dollar system, it still uses a unit of exchange, which means that women's skills and resources would have an external value placed on them. I don't believe that anyone can judge the

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\*My thanks go to Sara Karon and Ann Pooler for their help and encouragement in getting this article typed and ready by the deadline.

value of another woman's skills and resources except herself, and I didn't want those capitalist values transposed to a lesbian economy. Who can say whether a haircut is worth more or less than a massage—it depends on the context and the individuals involved.

I was also concerned that having a unit of exchange meant that we would have to set up an accounting (or policing) system which added a huge amount of unnecessary work, an element of bureaucracy, and an attitude of mistrust to the system—none of which I wanted to see in this community.

So I decided that I would present a system that did not incorporate a unit of exchange even though that was a risk. By doing away with a unit of exchange we then have to rely on our own estimations of our own worth, and we have to trust other women to do that for themselves, too. We are so used to the capitalist system and how it works that we have to shed a lot of entrenched values and attitudes about money and worth.

We had 12 dykes at the meeting, with another 12 having expressed interest. So with that number, we gauged that there definitely was interest in starting this economy, and we decided to go ahead. We organized for another meeting, which we called a Registration Day, where dykes could come along, find out more about the system, and register if they wanted to. And at that Registration Day, in April 1990, we had 25 registrations. Five months later, we had 35 members.

The idea behind LESY is simple and it's very easy to set up. Basically it's a pooling of our resources, skills, and knowledge so that we can meet our needs within our lesbian communities whenever possible. It's not a barter system, because it doesn't rely on direct exchange, i.e., on me having something which is of equal worth to you before we can swap skills. Once registered, any lesy is entitled to take as much from and give as much to the pool of resources as suits her at any give time. The belief is that dykes will take responsibility to monitor their own use of the system.

This is one of the issues that we had to do a lot of talking about. There was a fear of being "ripped off." In the end we agreed that if we didn't want an economy based on competition, mistrust, and greed, then we had to start from a position of trust and personal responsibility. To support this, we built into the guidelines, very strongly, the idea that no lesy was under any compulsion to say yes to a request at any time, that it's okay to say "no." That means that each lesy is responsible for determining for herself how much she puts into the system, and how much she

takes out, and is responsible for putting her value on her own time and resources.

This requires a leap of faith and trust, but it was agreed in the meeting that it is possible within a lesbian community and that it is a value that we want to build on and encourage in our community.

The administration of LESY, once it is set up, is very simple. It requires only one or two dykes to take on the responsibility for getting the newsletter out each month and for taking new registrations. This responsibility takes very little time and has been passed around amongst the LESY members in the Adelaide system.

The monthly newsletter is the means by which we build and maintain the LESY community. It's the way by which we can update our information, keep each other informed of current events in the lesbian community, keep track of how the LESY system is working and iron out any issues that develop, and it's a way of putting a social face on the system so that it becomes more personal.

Even though LESY had only been going for five months at the time of this writing, it was working very well. The range of resources and skills available is really wide, and as dykes use the scheme and start thinking more laterally about what they have to offer and what they want, lots of really creative ideas (e.g., cooperative equipment purchase) are coming out of it. It is important that we keep building and growing so that LESY becomes a strong viable opponent to the heteropatriarchal economy, and doesn't get diminished to being seen as a non-essential frill.

Since talking to other dykes about the scheme, interest and enthusiasm has caught on and LESY systems are being set up in other states in Australia and in several areas in the U.S. At the 1990 Lesbian Separatist Conference in Wisconsin, we had a workshop and many discussions about LESY, and several issues that require further exploration and attention were raised. These were issues of accessibility, confidentiality and screening.

Any lesbian community interested in setting up a similar scheme is welcome to use the LESY name and the guidelines, and can get more details by contacting me personally. (Carole Young, 36 First Ave., Nailsworth, South Australia, 5083.) My vision is an international link-up of LESY, so let me know if you get a system started in your area. Go for it dykes!

## LESY Guidelines

### Registration:

- Be as detailed about each resource you are offering as possible.
- Updates, to add or delete something, can be sent in at any time.
- There is space to write down special considerations such as "ring only on weekends," etc.
- A registration fee of \$10 is charged to cover the monthly newsletter.
- Upon registration you will receive a copy of all lesys' registration forms and you will be ready to start using the system! Please respect the confidentiality of other lesys and keep the forms for your use only.

### Newsletter:

- A mailout will come out monthly.
- Items in the newsletter include additions and deletions from registration forms; new lesys' forms; requests, e.g., "can anyone help me service my car" or offers, e.g., "my apricot tree is ready for picking this month"; reports on exchanges that have been humorous or unusual or opportune in some way; issues that arise that need dialogue and debate; and anything else you want!
- Helping with the newsletter is a contribution to the LESY system.

### Using LESY

- There will be situations when some exchange of money will be necessary to cover expenses. Each lesy will need to be clear about the dollar costs involved in the resources she is offering. It is not in the spirit of LESY to make a financial profit from the exchange, nor should any lesy be out of pocket because of an exchange.
- Each lesy should feel comfortable in using the system as frequently as she needs to—it will only work if it is used! There is no benefit in feeling reluctant or guilty about making requests.
- There is no accounting system except in your own head—you are the one who will weigh up whether you are giving and taking fairly.

- When you want something, ring a lesy who is offering what you want and negotiate. Be specific about the nature of the request, e.g., time involved, dollar expenses, etc. If noone is available or offering what you need, put a request in the newsletter. There is no expectation that you will need to have something of "equal value" to offer any lesy you request from—she will get her needs met by other lesys, and so it goes around.
- When someone rings you, there is no obligation to say yes. Only you can determine if you have the time, energy, ability or inclination at that time to meet a request. No excuses or explanations are necessary—"no" is enough. If you do say yes, be clear about your terms—time limit, expense money, etc. Try to think these issues through beforehand.

So you think you have nothing to offer? What about . . .

Time . . . Labour . . . Knowledge . . . Skills . . .

childcare	music lessons	bicycle repairs	tax advice
catering	cleaning	proposal writing	organization
astrology	picture framing	bookkeeping	animal care
sign writing	haircuts	sewing	cake making
gardening	counselling	word processing	painting
car maintenance	travel advice	taping vid/music	drawing
canoeing	shifting house	electrician	typing
massage	house minding	tarot readings	photography
carpentry	computer skills	dog sitting	demolition
healing	upholstery	interpreting	design
screenprinting	legal advice	printing	knitting

Goods

jam	almonds	plants/cuttings	manure
paper	flowers	handcrafts	vegies
firewood	eggs	used items	fruit

Resources

trailer	camping gear	work/store space	videos
music instruments	typewriter	computer	tools
kiln	horse	lawnmower	sport equip
dark room	holiday home	canoe	library

## **Friends and Foes: Scenes from an Inter-Class Friendship**

*Sue Homer and Desiree Bolman*

At the time we wrote these letters, our friendship was in a state of crisis. After being close friends for six years, we found ourselves fighting about just about everything, and eventually we stopped talking to each other. The letters were a way for us to try and resolve our differences, or at least to begin to talk to one another about them. They turned out to be the first step of a long and ongoing process of educating each other and rebuilding respect for one another.

As you will see from the letters, one of us is working class (Sue) and one of us is not (Dez). However, both of us have characteristics which contradict stereotypes of working and middle class women. At the time, Sue was in her second year of law school and is now a practicing lawyer. Dez has a ninth grade education and is now a practicing carpenter.

### **The Letters**

7/13/88

Dear Sue,

I wanted to write you sooner but my understanding of what was happening between us kept shifting and it's taken awhile to sink in. I was surprised that you thought I wasn't interested in pursuing the class issue with you (and for myself). But given all the big reactions that were flying around, I guess it was difficult for us to figure out who was caring about what. I have sought out several helpful people on the issue, as well as doing a lot of reading, and I feel like I can integrate some information without feeling so threatened.

This is the outline I'm working with at this point. It seems to me that it's all about power—who establishes and is able to make assumptions about norms, who is seen and who isn't (who we identify with and what values), and how deeply internalized this is. Power, to me, is the most volatile area between us and we each bring very loaded experiences with it to this relationship. I think our most painful dynamic happens when you react to me with anger and contempt at different times that seem arbitrary to me. I retreat in passive and self righteous "innocence" thinking you are on a superiority trip. Now I see a more subtle reality where I was able to make assumptions about the way I interacted and the way people "should" behave, dismissing what I thought was your random unchecked hostility. While I felt judged, baited, and condescended to, you felt unseen, unheard and continually dismissed. I also think our power dynamic is more complicated and included co-dependence from both sides but the class picture is a very central organizing theme.

Of course we don't trust each other now. I think that's an unrealistic expectation to have. One woman I spoke to suggested that we develop a collective set of working assumptions so that we are dealing with principles instead of trying to extract emotionally charged agreements from each other on things like trust or loyalty or commitment. We need an inclusive context to approach and begin negotiating our differences. I've thought about this a lot and how important it is for me to contribute some behavioral approaches instead of my mass of feeling. For me it would be important to include 1) that you have patience for the fact that we are from different backgrounds and are at different levels of understanding how class affects us and 2) that we can stop if it gets too painful. Also something about respecting each other's integrity. I know there is a lot of this that can't be worked out together, but for the times when we do interact, hopefully, we can name the power dynamics operating between us instead of reacting to them. Until recently I didn't understand what it meant to be accountable for my part of this struggle.

This is some of where I'm at. I hope some of this is helpful. I want us both to feel empowered by our relating and I'm beginning to understand what my part in that process is. Ruth's birthday is next week and I couldn't get any nights off. Call or write and/or I'll work something out.

Love,

Des

7/16/88

Dear Dez,

It's difficult for me to begin writing a response to your letter because I had such incredibly contradictory feelings and thoughts when I read it.

Initially, I was very put off by what seems to be a purely intellectual approach to this whole issue, and I guess, to our relationship. I must admit that I felt like I had received someone's manuscript for a book they were writing or their dissertation on "Class Conflict and Intimacy." That made me think about the times when I felt so frustrated because you just didn't see things the way I did; not so much that we didn't arrive at the same conclusions but that the way we got there and the way we expressed ourselves was so different. (I remember trying to edit some of your papers and saying to you "What are you trying to say? Can't you just say it?" and you coming back with even more complex language and imagery, trying to make it clearer by explaining it more in depth, and I would get more confused the more you wrote . . . ) I had the same reaction when I read your letter, including some (much) of the same hostility I felt when we tried to talk about this stuff. I'm going to try and explain why it pissed me off so much but bear with me because I've also decided not to "edit" or "rewrite" this letter for reasons that should become clear later on.

First, my experience with "class struggle" has been a very real and personal one. My class identity, my alienation, and my consciousness have all come about as a result of some real difficult conflicts with people and values in my life. I have never read a book about "class" nor have I engaged in any intellectual discussions with anyone about this. My conversations have been limited to sharing experiences and how those experiences have made me feel. I guess you can see how difficult it will be for us to somehow "come together" on this issue, since I also have no interest whatsoever in any abstract theoretical discussion about class issues (whether that means between us or anyone else).

Now, to be fair, I know that we're different and that we need to "process this" in our own way. I'm really trying not to make judgments, but as you can see it's pretty tough for me. I guess I feel like I've spent a good deal of energy trying to get various middle class folks to "be real" and to stop intellectualizing about issues in their life (particularly when they have something to do with me.) A central issue for me in doing this is that I just don't understand abstract concepts as well as I do concrete

reality (exactly what does "a collective set of working assumptions" or "an inclusive context to begin negotiating our differences" mean?) Am I stupid or what? (Please don't try and explain, it'll just get worse.)

In the interest of hopefully making this difference clear, I offer the following as my contribution to our discussion about class and how it impacts our relationship.

Class struggle is:

When I worry about whether you're criticizing my writing or phrasing or grammar or syntax instead of just writing to you.

When I know that you often worry about the very same thing (perhaps projecting your judgments about intellect?) when writing to others.

When I ask "who is she?" and you say "She's a psychologist" (or "she has a PH.D." or "she went to Smith") unless she's working class and then you say "she's my friend" or "I met her at the gym."

When we fight about whether private schools deserve their reputation for being the 'best and the brightest' or whether they even have such a reputation.

When you talk about your parents and family as if they have some kind of plague and I treat your family as if their negative qualities are just personality quirks that one must overlook when dealing with one's family.

When you say 'I feel angry' and I say 'You're a stupid jerk.'

When I say 'If you just discipline yourself, you could get your degree,' and you shrug and say "For what?"

When you tell me that I'm the one with all the education and I'm the one who's gonna 'get ahead' as if it's perfectly natural that the measure of my success is my level of education, or my wage-earning power.

When you're asked to write an article for LesCon and you ask Sim and Beth to edit it for you and you conspicuously refrain from asking me.

These are some of the things that I've been thinking about lately. I'm not writing about them to 'blame' you; just to sort of offer my perspective about how class has impacted our friendship in specific and significant ways. And also I guess to say that I take this stuff very personally (this means it hurts my feelings and then I get pissed off), or at least I used to and that I constantly felt like these were things that we could never resolve. I just naively hoped they wouldn't come up; of course they always did (which sort of explains why we fought so much).

Please try and remember that it's just me you're writing to and not some intellectual jerk. I guess that part of the problem with writing letters is that writing is so much more formal. I miss the familiarity and openness of our earlier discussions. Perhaps we'll get better at this.

Call me about Ruth ASAP. Next week is pretty booked for me because of our trip and my job, so call soon.

Love,

*Sue*

July 20, 1988

Dear Sue,

So somewhere between feeling and expression I choke. I don't even know what I feel except that pain registers and I react protectively. Your points are well taken, even without the underlining. But somehow it keeps coming down to me who has to do all the changing. On the scale where on one side "I feel angry" and the other is "You stupid jerk" you don't seem to think there's any middle ground. This is a problem because you are really abusive and I think you're trying to pass it off as 'honesty' or a kind of working class straightforwardness. (And I know that you don't think that you are abusive—in fact, you think I am a big baby.)

One thing I know about the experience of abuse is that if you don't return to those experiences with some compassion for yourself then you perpetuate that abuse by re-enacting abusive situations in order to try and master them. Guess where I think that you and I fit into that picture? You seem to want my friendship but are so aware of your oppression that you can't and don't want to cut me any slack—even as your friend. You are challenging me in some sensitive areas that I haven't looked at (have been trying like crazy to overlook), like my trips about school and my relationship with my relatives. I'm grateful (even though it's difficult) but you are relentless and you're right—I can't hang. I resent you imposing your self-critical scale on my garbage. We both share a value of being self-critical but you lose sight of compassion for the person inside who is struggling to make it. Somehow I don't think all of this has to be so alienating but maybe that's naive. Maybe because everything is so raw and exposed after years of buildup, our differences are not tolerable. Maybe we need more time to be more honest about some things before we can figure out some common ground to hang out and move forward from. Anger converts to hostility quickly for you and I feel too vulnerable

to deal directly in person with that part of this struggle. I want to figure this out without reacting so protectively. Maybe these letters are the common ground.

I've never done too well at spontaneity or responding under pressure. It wasn't my experience in life. There are things I want to change but I don't know how much is realistic and I'm feeling very unseated by this. I realize how unaware I was of my impact on you as a vulnerable person. We have had a big tendency to collude in a focus on me and a lot of your experience in this relationship was invisible to me. I'm sorry about that. I hope you can write me before you go to Mexico. Have fun swimming.

Love,  
Des

August 8, 1988

Dez,

So here I am sitting in bed supposed to be studying for a midterm on some jerk's theory of crime in a capitalist society, but instead I'm gonna write back to you. Sorry it took so long. I have been thinking about what you said all along. So it isn't that I just lost interest or whatever—though being too busy is a crummy excuse.

I was surprised at the 'tone' of your letter. In particular, it seems like you felt pretty attacked by my last letter, or at least criticized pretty severely. I think that's really significant and also it describes a typical situation for us, so maybe it'll help to look at it more closely.

When I discussed the differences between us I wasn't recommending that you change, at all. The fact that you're so different is one of the reasons that I've always been interested in you and one of the reasons I like you. What I think is significant about our differences is the extent to which we make judgments about each other. What is also significant though are the assumptions that underlie those judgments and the extent to which we ever (never?) challenge those assumptions.

For example, the "I feel angry/You're a jerk" thing represents to me the different ways we deal with our emotions, a great deal of which is influenced by our class backgrounds. The key, though, is that the way I do things is always measured against the 'standard' or 'right' way, the middle class way. So, yes, we're different, but those differences don't exist in a vacuum, where all things are valued equally in the world—they exist in a world where your way is the right way (why does the underlining bother you?) and mine isn't. It isn't right, isn't 'appropriate,' isn't

'legitimate,' and, like you said, sometimes my way is just totally irrelevant or invisible.

So that means that my purpose in trying to point out some real examples of how class background informs who we are was to challenge some of the assumptions that underlie your basic attitudes. My attitudes are challenged every day, Dez, in everything I think and ways I behave, by all the feedback I get from the world and the ways I come up short. But your attitudes in many ways are consistent with "the norm" and therefore they go unchallenged. Not in the sense of right or wrong but in the sense of what assumptions those attitudes are based on and how particular to the middle class they are. In other words, there are other equally legitimate ways of looking at the world that you have to acknowledge and take into account in forming your attitudes and opinions. This takes a conscious effort on your part because you don't get that kind of negative feedback that is an inherent aspect of being working class (unless, of course, you have a friend like me who tries to challenge some of those attitudes).

In some ways I feel like you're really threatened by this type of feedback and that's why you resent it so much. It's interesting that you characterize it as a situation of recreating abuse. It seems that if your hypothesis was true then oppressed people would never really be able to righteously challenge the attitudes and behavior of the oppressor without recreating the abusive dynamic that we're victims of. I guess I don't buy that. I don't see myself as trying to master abusive situations by recreating them when I challenge your attitudes or beliefs any more than I think women are identifying with their abusers when they assert their rights vis-a-vis men or challenge sexist attitudes, or that people of color are recreating abuse when they challenge racism. Even if their actions are full of anger and hostility, they are not 'abusive'—they are not attempts to coerce or to inflict their will upon others. They are attempts to reflect back the kind of feedback they get every moment in their own lives by virtue of their mere existence from their oppressor. But they carry with them a very different kind of power—maybe this is too deep, but I don't see the power as coercive—I see it as more disruptive, because it challenges the established order of things by looking at that order in a real different way.

So, to make this concrete, I guess I would say that I criticize often not because I think you should do things differently (to coerce) but because I want to illuminate that things don't have to be done the way they are (to

disrupt). Maybe your perception of my criticism is a result of your background, Dez. Please try and think about this—it doesn't mean your perception is wrong, it just means it isn't absolute. Every attitude you have may be determined or at least significantly influenced by your class background and certain attitudes seem to be profoundly influenced by it. It's very similar to "male consciousness"—there are some attitudes that are profoundly influenced and even determined by our gender. Often, men take these attitudes as absolutes, not as the particular point of view of their gender. If they would acknowledge this fact and acknowledge that our different perspectives aren't equally valued, then maybe we could get somewhere.

Unfortunately, individuals see this type of challenge as a personal attack. It doesn't have to be that way. I think it's important to remember that we're all subject to some pretty strong forces to retain the status quo, so I guess it's pretty threatening on a personal level. I don't know how to solve this. . . . because I don't really understand it. Maybe you can offer some insight on why it's seen as such a personal attack.

By the way, I think if you want to write and rewrite your letters you should and if you want this conversation to happen on a less personal level, you should be able to discuss that. The only thing I ask is that you take a look at some of this stuff and make sure that it's what you want, not what has been programmed for you as being appropriate or 'the best way' or whatever.

Love,

Sue

## Epilogue

Sue

Well, Dez and I were able to begin talking again after my last letter. But, believe me, it was hell for a long time. I remember the low point—when Dez told me (after one of our most heated battles) that she had serious doubts about whether 'it was worth it' for her to continue being my friend. What a concept. It never occurred to me that friendship was something you measured in terms of its worth or its usefulness. Once you called someone your friend, you stuck by them (even though there were times when you wanted to kill them). I had lots of hard times with my other friends, but none of them had ever evaluated the 'efficiency of their investment' in our friendship the way that Dez had.

That kind of statement could only come from someone who has the luxury of choosing friends according to their 'worth.' The rest of us know that we need each other to survive, and as a result we concentrate on working out our differences, or at least tolerating them. I know now that loyalty is a working class value, one that middle class women don't necessarily share. It seems that often middle class women stick around in friendships as long as you have something to offer, something that adds to their 'worth.' (Oops, I started to launch into one of my diatribes about middle class women. Now the middle class women reading this are thinking, "Loyalty isn't a class issue; I'm loyal to all of my friends . . .")

You know, the loyalty thing was typical of most of our arguments: their underlying source was always a conflict of values. Consequently, we always ended up in a struggle over whose values were 'better' (in the guise of who was 'right' and who was 'wrong' about a particular issue or situation). Now when we argue, we get to the point much quicker. For example, Dez has a (working class) friend who kept bugging her to repay some money that she had borrowed. Finally, the friend got really mad and they got into an argument about it. When Dez told me about it, she said "I don't see what the big deal is when she has \$2000 in the bank." I laughed and said that I thought it was funny how she was always keeping track of how much money everybody had and what they did with it. Dez got this sheepish look on her face and then we both started laughing. We spent the rest of the evening remembering all the times Dez had asked "Just what does she do with her money?" (instead of arguing about whether or not money is a class issue).

Looking back, I think our difficulties really came to a peak at that particular time because it was my second year of law school and I was having a pretty hard time adjusting. I had never been in a place where there were so many middle and upper class folks. Needless to say, I was pissed off a lot of the time I was there, especially at the other dykes who were my classmates. Despite the fact that most of them were politically correct in every possible way (or so they thought), they had absolutely no clue about class differences. They were just as locked into all the stuff about competition and status as everyone else. That sounds like a vague judgement about their politics, but what it really means is that they all went to private colleges and had fathers who were lawyers and mothers who were artists (if I meet another middle class woman who thinks she's an artist . . .) and they treated me and other working class folks like we

were the help. And even the ones who meant well were condescending, at best.

This led to a painful realization for me: for the first time since I had come out, I felt more comfortable and more of an alliance with other people (even some men) than with lesbians from my own community, including some of my own friends. It's clear to me now that Dez became a target for a lot of the hostility that I felt toward these women. Fortunately, she stuck around until I figured that out.

As painful as it was, I was lucky things happened the way they did. Now my friendship with Dez is more like it should be: I trust her and I know (I think) that she'll stand by me if things get rough. As for our community, I'm not so optimistic. It seems to me that the people on the bottom are doing all the work and the folks on top are hoping that the rest of us will go away and stop bugging them. No such luck.

### Dez

I think there is no way to avoid class war when you deal intimately with class issues. Believe me there are no "nice" ways to "process" these feelings. Meaning well wasn't enough and that's where the war started. I was used to getting strokes each step of the way and instead I was getting criticized. There came a point when our class issues overwhelmed the relationship and the only choice I had on a daily basis was whether I could hang out with Sue or not. Our letters made it possible for me to begin accepting the struggle. Plus I really missed hanging out with her.

The fact that we were able to name our differences gave us something in common to build on. But it was often two steps forward and three steps back. Sue would make a comment like "That's middle class bullshit," not necessarily referring to me or something I said, and I would understand it and agree. Then I would go home, rehash the conversation in my head and feel totally trashed by her. Later when I spoke to her I would accuse her of trashing me. She would say that she wasn't even talking about me and that personalizing everything she said was middle class bullshit. And then we would repeat the same argument over again.

Partly, I think that personalizing our class struggle was a way of trying to control it and make it something different, something we were equally responsible for. But it was a double-edged sword: I had more control but I was also more at fault. It wasn't until I began to see our class conflicts as bigger than both of us that some of the responsibility for what was happening began to shift from me to the system. I also realized the way that the system worked against me and the stake I had in challenging it.

Once I recognized the source of our differences, however, I felt self-conscious about my middle class heritage. Suddenly I felt pasty and cultureless. There were a lot of times when I didn't know what to say or how to be with Sue any more. I thought that our differences meant that we couldn't be close because she had contempt for the middle class part of me. Even after all those years of hanging out I envied the easy familiarity Sue had with her working class friends that was different from what we had. We refer to this as the "WHAT ABOUT ME" syndrome: "What about my pain? What about everything I've been through? Doesn't that mean anything? How can you say that I'm privileged when I've been so oppressed?"

I tried to avoid my responsibility to our class issues by zeroing in on my own oppression. But this tactic was counter-productive. Sue reminded me of how often we had heard men dismiss our contentions and try to refocus the discussion on their own issues. After a while, I realized I was reframing class issues in the same way. The challenge was to be able to recognize my oppression in one context and take responsibility for my privilege in another. Meeting the challenge is an ongoing process.

I still feel queasy sometimes. The good part is that we can tease each other about sensitive areas related to our class issues. The hard part is when we have eruptions of class war that we aren't able to deal with directly at the moment. I guess we'll always have those. A Native American woman in a racism workshop I went to said: "It makes me very happy to see all of these white women squirming and feeling so uncomfortable here because that is how I have felt all of my life." I guess I'm getting used to squirming. Also I didn't lose what I was most afraid of losing. I got my friend back.

*Afterword from Jeanette:* When I talked to Sue and Des as I was sending this issue to the printer, they said their friendship had gotten even better since this writing. Des said this was because they had the same values about friendship underneath their differences—loyalty, perseverance and stubbornness. Sue said that the working class perspective is that once you're friends with someone, you're always friends, you work things out. Usually the middle class woman bails out, but Des didn't.

## Fire and Frost: Class Conflict Styles in a Lesbian Relationship

*Betsy*

S and I have been in a mixed-class-background lesbian relationship for four years. Many of our differences and conflicts can be traced back to the fact that she grew up working-class and Jewish on the lower east side of Manhattan and I grew up upper-middle-class and WASP in the suburbs of New Jersey. About two years ago we went through a hard time that taught me a lot about differing class communication styles, and about how to unlearn some of my middle-class limitations. (And about Jewish/WASP dynamics as well: the class differences in this story have some flavor of our ethnic backgrounds too.)

Our hard time was a year full of power struggles and disagreements over everything. The hardest part of it for me was my usually warm and supportive lover screaming at me, going silent and not speaking all day, slamming doors, blaming me for anything wrong in her life, and saying extreme statements like, "I do so much for you and you never do anything for me!" I felt terribly hurt and miserable.

I had never in my 32 sheltered years had to deal with anyone loudly and dramatically "acting out" (in fact, almost no one had ever shouted at me before), and in the face of what seemed like a very extreme situation, I acted as I would in a building on fire: I put aside my own feelings and tried to stay calm and do what I thought were sensible things that would help everyone survive.

Friends and counselors kept reminding me that "it takes two to tango," that every dynamic is created by both people in it. They kept saying that there must be things I was doing to keep us stuck in this awful space, and so there must be things I could do to change the dynamic. I took their advice to mean that I should be more understanding and tolerant. I thought they were telling me to empathize more, to try not to get

"hooked" into my own feelings, to look for the piece of truth in whatever she said, and to look for creative solutions that would meet both our needs. I tried this approach for months. It didn't work. The more understanding and tolerant I acted, the more dramatically emotional she acted. And gradually I felt more and more resentful and disgusted. On the outside I was calmly suggesting creative compromises to each conflict; on the inside I was resentfully thinking, "I'm not *making* her be crazy; she's just being crazy on her own."

Finally we had a conversation with a working-class friend trained as a feminist therapist. She listened to us describe our conflicts, S's acting out, her efforts to control herself, and my efforts to deal with her. She said to me, "It sounds like you're *managing* her and the relationship." "What do you mean?" I asked. She said I was pushing away my own personal reactions and stepping outside, like it was my role to be in charge and come up with solutions for both of us. She said I was treating S like she was only an out-of-control problem, and not like she had any inner resources to give. She asked S if she felt like I was "managing" her. "Yes." "Would you like B to stop managing?" "Yes." "Would you rather hear her real reactions and feelings than her efforts to put those aside and manage things?" "Yes!"

I was stunned. I'd had no idea. I grew up in an ethnic and class culture that highly valued suppressing emotions and sounding "rational." My dad worked as a manager, and I was educated to hold managerial jobs. My parents had a very unhappy marriage, and I never once heard them argue or raise their voices at each other. S and I were stuck in a profoundly classist dynamic, each acting out the communication patterns of our culture of origin. My efforts to resolve our conflicts were in fact oppressing her.

I don't blame myself for how I acted. I was doing the best I could with the skills and information I had at the time. I wasn't conscious of any impulses to control or to feel superior. But unconsciously, they were there.

For S, just at the moments when she started to feel upset, her lover would start acting like every cool distant upper-class gentile who had run every institution she'd seen in her life, so of course she reacted by feeling enraged, and rejected, and self-hating. I was playing a part in creating her acting out, but in a different, opposite way that I hadn't understood before.

Once we got this insight, we experimented with ways to shift our dynamics. We tried to have either both of us or neither of us look for solutions, not just me. I tried being more real, more direct, more expressive of my reactions in the moment. I learned to talk in ways I had never talked in my nice WASP life, like yelling at her: "Shut up, S! You're being an asshole!" (She reports that this makes her feel loved.) I even slammed a few doors myself. Or I would cry and say, "I don't like this and I don't know how to get it to change."

It more or less worked. She was more able to call upon her strong interpersonal skills once she'd heard how much I was hurting. (To my total surprise, she didn't know how unhappy I was when I didn't express it loudly.) Sometimes the tension was broken just because she burst into laughter at the sight of her stiff middle-class girlfriend yelling rude things. And it has felt liberating to me to have new modes of communication available to me. The awful time passed.


Of course our dynamics didn't change completely. We often still split the roles of emotional and "rational" between us the same way. And I still hear that "manager" voice come out of my mouth sometimes. But something essential has shifted, and if we had another really hard time, I think we would both deal with it much better. The patriarchal class power structure has less of a grip within our relationship. We are one step away from being "Born to Manage" and "Born to Hustle" (as she nicknames us) trying to relate from their different worlds, and one step closer to being two free women loving each other.

I see our different styles of communication and conflict each having some strengths and some weaknesses. One strength of her style is that other people always know that she's upset (whereas my feelings are often invisible to others even when I want them known). Another strength is that in certain situations (like trying to return something to an unwilling store), being louder and more disruptive makes her more likely to get what she wants. We usually have her call the telephone repair people, or else she coaches me on how to sound assertive and outraged. She is also fabulous at giving voice in a clear, constructive way to the hidden conflicts going on in a group. A strength of my style is that I am more often able to put what I want into words, which makes me more likely to get it (whereas her real desires are often buried by emotion). It is also a strength that I am often able to listen, empathize, and feed back what I hear even when I am upset myself, which sometimes helps

resolve conflicts more easily. On the whole, I'd say we are about even in strengths and weaknesses.

But the wider world—and even the lesbian world—validates my style and invalidates hers. Here is an example. We were shopping for lesbian therapists, and in one initial session we mentioned our different communication styles. The therapist commented that it sounded like my mental health was better than S's! We rejected that therapist.

I envision a lesbian community where diverse styles of conflict are seen as gifts we can give each other and learn from each other. I thank S and our relationship for giving me a chance to grow outside the boundaries of middle-class WASP culture.



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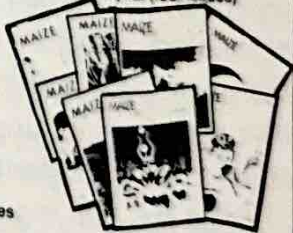


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## Mixed-Class Confusion

zana

i've wanted to write about my class background for years, but have always been stopped by the fear that i'll just sound defensive: "i may seem middle class, but there are other reasons i do such-and-such."

and, in fact, there *are* other reasons. and, in fact, there are reasons that boil down to privilege anyway, even if they didn't start out that way. for instance, some of the values i get from being half jewish help me get along in the middle class even though my jewish father grew up in the ghetto, poor.

class is hard to talk about partly because it *is* complex. many people's backgrounds are mixed—their parents were from different classes, and they (or their parents) have moved up or down on the class ladder. this fragmentedness describes my background, but only partially: there were other factors that added to the confusion. for years i've tried to make order out of something that doesn't want to be orderly. instead, now it occurs to me that there can be value in just talking out the details.

i guess my first big jolt of class confusion came in sixth grade. my father confided in me that we had \$33,000 in the bank. i'm not sure why he chose to honor (and burden) my young ears with this information. it does go along with the way in which i was raised: included in much of the adult business. also, my father likes to show off his financial acumen. he takes pride in the hard work, hard saving, and intelligence that allowed him to escape poverty.

whether he specifically said so or not, i got the idea that i shouldn't tell my friends about the money. certainly, they never would have guessed. we lived frugally, to say the least. i used to feel that in our house, the depression had never ended. i first saw a piece of moldy food at the age of 11 in someone else's house. food waste in our house was more than a crime—it was unthinkable. we saved string, bags, rags, rubber bands, gift wrap, you name it. to this day i have rarely bought any of

those things which are gotten for free. back then i felt like a freak when i found that other kids didn't save those things. still today i feel that way when one of my dyke land-sisters opens my sewing basket and exclaims, "wow, look at all those safety pins!" yeah, and a lot of them are over 30 years old: the little brass ones that came on doll clothes i shoplifted. i've had the basket that long, too. you don't buy new things when the old suffice.

thirty years ago, \$33,000 was an even more impressive sum than today. my 12-year-old mind was torn between what it meant to "have" such an astronomical amount, and the fact that in daily life, we didn't. yes, it was good to know it existed. once we went to peer at \$30,000 houses (we owned a \$10,000 house) and i shared my father's pride that he could have bought one outright. i knew from adult talk that most people didn't pay cash for big things. they bought them on credit, and that's how the rich got rich and the poor got poorer. we bought cars and houses outright and paid no interest. how my father managed to save so much, to get that far ahead while supporting a wife and four kids, is a mystery only he knows, cause when i was born he was scooping ice cream for a living. (that is, i know nothing of investments, wheeling and dealing, illegalities, veteran's benefits, etc. the part i know all too well is the scrimping and saving. and i know my father rarely had "free time"—worked probably 12-14 hours a day as a fuller brush man.

the second great confusion for me, when i became aware of class divisions, was about "culture." my family took great interest in the arts. at nine, i had two favorite records—one from a walt disney cartoon movie, and one by tchaikowsky. there are opera arias i still hum automatically because daddy sang them all the years i was growing up. in the bathroom there would be a book with two markers in it—both parents were reading it and discussing it. i did not, like my friends, go ga-ga over elvis. one of my biggest thrills ever was getting to hear lily pons live in concert—a special concert with all seats a dollar, so we got to sit on the main floor instead of the second balcony.

i was greatly encouraged in artistic pursuits. mom bought me a small set of oil paints; my aunt raved over my drawings and said i got my talent from grandpa siegel, a russian-jewish immigrant who, working in a factory, still found time and energy to paint, copying scenes from postcards.

we lived in a neighborhood that was working class/lower middle, and that's where most of my friends came from. they mostly weren't

interested in books, plays, classical music. i learned not to talk about these things or i would be thought of as weird. it may be that these kids were rejecting their parents' values more than i was. it may be that if i had dared talk about things as they really were in my home, i would have eventually found i wasn't the only one. but i didn't. and so i did feel like the only one. and i related that both to being jewish in an anglo environment, and to class. somehow i felt of a different class than my neighborhood friends. yet when i made friends outside the neighborhood—middle class friends—there was so much in their homes, their assumptions, and their nicey-nice conformity that made me uncomfortable.

when i moved to lesbian land 10 years ago, class soon became a bigger issue than ever before in my life. i suppose because we all wanted utopia and were so angry when we couldn't make that happen. in those years, in that place, there was only one angry woman of color and one angry disabled woman (me). but there were groups of angry mothers, jewish women, and working class/poor women. those were hard, bewildering times. having grown up watching supposedly "middle class" people on tv—people who lived with much more affluence than my family—and not identifying with them much at all, i was alarmed to suddenly be called middle class. alarmed, offended, defensive. didn't middle class mean conforming, and buying into the status quo? besides having worked for years at low wages, i had never felt at home in mainstream american culture.

it was painful to be told that women didn't trust me because i spoke in a precise way, with school-perfect grammar. or because i'd had the privilege of artistic encouragement and thus felt comfortable identifying as an artist and writer. i'm sure many people had felt those ways about me in the past, but only in the relative honesty of lesbian community was anyone saying them out loud. with all the pain i felt, i still was relieved to have the truth come out. better than playing guessing games!

maybe i could say "i can't help it" about those kinds of privilege, but then there was money. it was mind-blowing to suddenly be perceived as "high income" because of getting a regular (disability) check—but there you have it. among dykes on land, a monthly check of nearly any amount beats trying to live off of odd jobs, craft sales, savings, etc. my disability settlement of \$5000, plus another \$5000 i was able to get from my father by asking him to give it to me now instead of in his will, was money i immediately put into our purchase of the land we lived on.

i also paid one of the highest monthly portions of the land payment. yet for some of my poor/working class land-sisters, this was not enough. i was pressured to do more money-sharing, at this point class and disability issues began to collide for me. my monthly check bought me goods and services i needed as a disabled woman—as well as some comforts that helped compensate for my limitations. if i gave up more of that money, would the group insure that my needs were met?

it has taken me years to get any kind of perspective on that situation—one that ended hurtfully for all concerned. i'm living on a different lesbian land now. for many reasons, which i hope include my own growth, class has rarely been an issue for me here. having a close friend from a poor background enables me to learn more about class in an environment that doesn't feel hostile.

i assess who i am now, in my mid-40s. less denying of the label "middle class." (i define myself as lower middle class.) less defensive about it. if someone is put off by how i use the english language, so be it. i've been turned off by others' mannerisms, and sometimes that's just how it is. i don't any more seek to deny that it's a class privilege. my working class mother was the one who did the hard work of learning how "educated" people spoke and passing it on to us kids. slowly i've come to understand just how much that particular gift benefits me, for survival in a hierarchical society . . . in subtle ways, like how i'm treated by store clerks, as well as the more obvious advantages like having been able to breeze through english classes without even studying.

disability and class is still a tough one. one of the hardest realizations for me has been that many wimin from poor or working class backgrounds push beyond pain and fatigue in ways i don't. i grew up getting medical care for physical problems. (that's one thing the savings were for.) wimin from lower class backgrounds often appear (to me) to be more able-bodied than i am, and then i may want help from them that taxes their own bodies. they may not think to refuse, being unused to making a big deal of their own body limitations. in several situations, wimin have ended up annoyed or angry at me when they realized they were sacrificing their well-being for mine. only through time, trust, communication and friendship does it seem possible to stop these dynamics. i hope we come away from such interactions with a better understanding of ourselves and each other. these are the tools that will help us act differently in the future.

money-sharing . . . is something i want to do with wimin i care about. i don't want to end up resentful, though. to avoid that, i've found it necessary to go slowly and carefully into this dangerous territory. what's my motive, my intent? do i expect something back? if so, i need to let the other woman know about that expectation!

i've shared money most often by paying a larger amount of land payment or rent than wimin with less income. i've shared by giving money in emergencies and by paying for necessities or a fun evening out when friends didn't have much money coming in. i recognize the point at which i still hold power and control: *i choose* which wimin i will be generous with and in what situations; i decide how much of my income i can spare. even when i've had an ongoing monthly commitment with someone, that can end at *my* discretion. i'm on the other end of this often enough—sometimes around money but usually around disability—so i know it injects something unpleasant into friendships. there's the constant knowledge that if you displease the other woman, her aid may end.

another aspect of class privilege is those resources we have hidden access to. i have had to come to terms with the fact that even though i don't *want* to take money from my father (let alone ask for it), i do have that option. he's not rich, but he could help out in crisis. i also expect i'll inherit *some* money from my family—maybe not a lot, but some. and i know wimin who have no family alive, or whose families have no money or assets to leave them.

as i learn to take more responsibility for my privilege, i want others to do so as well. if i pay the middle of a sliding scale admission, it makes me mad to find someone with hidden resources paying the bottom because she's "broke" this week. to me, "broke" means you have no money anywhere—no trust funds, CDs, savings—nada. i don't want to hear friends saying they "can't afford" things when what they really mean is they don't choose to spend their money that way.

it seems to me that the first step in combatting classism is being honest about the facts of our lives. it's hard to talk about money. hard to admit to privilege. hard to open oneself to criticism. this article has been hard to write. it's the product of years of thought. it comes out of being pushed up against the wall about class issues—and also from having poor and working class sisters be gentle and loving and patient with my process. i know i'm still near the beginning of this journey—the learning of how to share privilege, the understanding of how class has shaped me and what it continues to mean in how i live my life.

## The Sexual Politics of House-Hold Help: My Life as a "Cleaning Girl"

R.A.E.

Even the most casual observer notes the racial and ethnic transformation of white middle income and luxury New York City dwellings during weekday working hours. Women of color arrive to clean up after conservative and liberal heterosexual couples alike, to take care of their new white children, and to assist the elderly privileged who, less mobile than their neighbors, remain inside ready to be escorted out. There is, however, a growing number of less visible women whose job it is to pick up and look after others. I fall into this category of women. Few discuss this group of women because to do so entails a candid discussion of *sexual* politics. I do not intend to provide an objective analysis of who I am, those I work for or what I do. I am a young lesbian, a radical feminist; I clean up after men, most of whom are gay, and I think that cleaning for others is an odious occupation. I write best when I am angry. Today I am angry.

In this essay I want to discuss the socioeconomic discrepancies of the gay and lesbian "community" (sic) which manifest, in part, most clearly in lesbians cleaning gay men's houses. I want to briefly expose what it is that I am subjected to as a "maid" and have you consider that those who hire women to clean up after them want more than a clean home; they want to feel powerful. Having a cleaner is a psychological bourgeois high for the nouveau middle class intent on announcing to the world, "I have arrived." In conclusion, I want to expose the absurdity of thinking that paying one group (almost always women) to clean up after another group (almost always men and their wives) provides for equality. We should, instead, live in a society where people clean up after themselves and none finds herself in the subordinate position of having to take jobs that entail cleaning others' toilets.

I consider myself living proof that the most downwardly mobile person in u.s. society is a woman who refuses to, in any way, be intimate with men—both within her family and outside of it. I was born the daughter of an upper-middle class man. I refer to myself as privileged, despite my complete independence from my family. I left home at 16 and refuse to have any contact with them even now. I realize that for many women the possibilities of obtaining work outside of cleaning are unlikely. For this reason alone I see myself as exceptionally privileged. I am credentialized, I have a BA and an MA—from “good” schools. I was foolish enough to think that if I worked hard enough I could maintain my financial independence in a way that is not as humiliating as having to clean up after men.

I am a student living off a \$6,000 annual stipend from the government. That is what graduate students receive for providing teaching and research assistance to mostly male faculty. It is a form of financial assistance from the state and if one makes too much money one no longer qualifies for it. It may not be much but such stipends come with tuition remission, without which graduate school would be an impossibility for me. Receiving money from the state is a catch 22, you must be poor to receive assistance and stay poor. The rigid qualifications prevent many from getting work above-the-table and at the same time make off-the-book work a necessity for survival.

My life as a “cleaner” began when I needed money desperately and combed the pages of a women’s paper. I saw a classified ad which read: “Gay Owned and Operated: Be out, flexible hours and good pay.” Not having enough money to invest in my own answering machine and then compete with the numerous other women who plaster the “community” with their colorful cleaning service advertisements, I decided to obtain my “clients” through this gay owned and operated company. The company’s name is Castle Care—this is no joke. You know, every man’s house (or apartment) is his castle, and so it was. The two gay male proprietors would place ads for “cleaners” in the women’s paper(s) and would place ads for the cleaning service in the men’s papers. Say no more about the economics of our (sic) “community.” Men can pay for lesbian “cleaners,” lesbians can’t often afford to meet their living expenses, so we clean up after men, a patriarchal quid pro quo of sorts. I could stop here, but there is more and I write best when I am angry.

Gay men have apartments like other men have apartments. Lesbians frequently team up with housemates and live modestly. Our gay brothers do not live modestly, they do not have to. Many earn twice as much as women. They are, do not forget, men. When there are two of them earning twice as much as women (and not supporting children) that means considerable "disposable" income with which to purchase numerous services, like, for example, house and office cleaning.

The "client" paid \$10.00 per hour for the services I provided. I was earning \$6.00 an hour, the gay male entrepreneurs took a 40% cut. There was a minimum four hour charge. Many of these men wanted all they could get for their money. Although their apartment may have only taken three hours to clean, they intended to get four hours worth of hard labor. I later learned to pace myself accordingly but, until then, it was hell. The men would come up with additional grotesque tasks to get their money's worth. For example, I had to clean bacteria ridden and roach infested refrigerators and scrub mildew from their bathroom tiles for up to an hour. One man used to have me follow him around his apartment with a bottle of Fantastic in one hand and paper towels in the other. He would point to the places on his latex painted wall where he saw a dirty spot and I would spray and wipe. I would think that in the time it took for his little ritual, he could have done it himself.

While I will not write that the apartments and the men who owned them were all alike, I will tell you that they were strikingly similar. Their apartments did not have wooden crates with records, lots of books on window sills, posters tacked to walls, cats and old sofas. No, our brothers, many of who refer to us and our feminist politics as "bourgeois," had the latest CD stereo components complete with remote control, entertainment centers, few books but lots of subscriptions to architectural magazines and other large artsy coffee table tabloids, no posters taped or tacked to walls but framed lithographs and lots of objects d'art, no cats but many jungle-like plants, leather couches and VCRs for their voluminous pornography collections. Yes, there was not one man's apartment, and I've cleaned over 50, that did not have some pornography. Oh, and mirrors. Often there was at least one wall in the apartment with mirrors from parquet floor to ceiling or slightly lower.

Many of the men were superficially friendly with me, their lesbian sister. Two men I cleaned for on a biweekly basis assumed that I had great interest in their latest renovations. Every other week I got a tour of their apartment. I used to, in my anger, repress my laughter at their

garish taste. Their livingroom had bright pink walls, yellow window sills and a fireplace painted baby blue over which an intentionally off center painting hung. Like many men's, their apartment was adorned with Chippendale's paraphernalia, greeting cards, calendars and . . . numerous pictures of themselves. Their bathroom was fully mirrored which made it particularly difficult to clean. The practicality of this renovation was something that these men did not have to concern themselves with. Cleaning is something that most men pretend to not know how to do. They don't have to, they can hire poor women.

The men who I cleaned for not only assumed that I had an interest in their latest decorating endeavors, they assumed that I had an interest in their recent purchases, travels and business deals. They would "chat" with me and I would pretend to listen. I needed the money. Repulsed by their conspicuous consumption, I just wanted to clean their slovenly apartments and quickly be gone.

They never asked me, really asked me, about myself. They believed that all I did was clean and that I did not mind cleaning. What is more, they assumed that I cared about them. I did not, I did not care for them at all.

I later ran my own service when I could afford my own answering machine and plastered all of the "community" bulletin boards with my own posters. As a result, I had fewer clients but the money I earned was my own.

I was foolish enough to think that as a lesbian I would not be subjected to cleaning up after men. Heterosexual women did that, I thought. But with the feminization of poverty comes an increase of men's wages relative to women's. Heterosexual women are now saying to their sexual partners that they simply do not have time to work and do all the cleaning which, I suspect, could easily be taken care of if he merely considered doing his own share. To meet the increasing demands placed on them, more and more heterosexual women then hire women of color and lesbians. Most of those I cleaned for, however, were men, gay men. Gay men, unlike straight men, don't have lovers and wives to pick up after them and take an interest in their chatter, so they hire women. They like to hire lesbians, you know, keep the gratuities in the "community." I never seriously considered that the financial imperatives of my life would necessitate doing what I thought heterosexual women had to do. Not until recently was I aware that there are plenty of lesbians, like me, picking up after men and their significant others.

This essay is about my experience as a cleaner. Living in New York City, most of my "clients" are gay men rather than heterosexual couples. I want to remark that cleaning is not all I provide for the "client." This fact became increasingly evident as I continued "cleaning."

There is a man I clean for once a month. I think that is all he probably can afford. When I first arrived he told me how he wanted his oriental rugs shampooed and his wooden kitchen cabinets waxed. I said "yes" and when he left I simply vacuumed the rugs clean and took Lemon Pledge to his kitchen cabinets. He thinks that I do exactly as I am told. Like lots of women, my strategy is not to deny him and other men their illusions. He thinks that his apartment is clean and it is. One day, before he was about to leave his apartment, he called a friend. I overheard him say, "I'll be right over, I could not make it earlier because I had to let the maid in." I suppressed a laugh, not only because I had a set of my own keys to his place but because I considered his attempt to sound more privileged than he is pathetic. He just had to tell his friend that he had a maid. To tell his friend the truth, that he had a poor lesbian graduate student come in to clean his tiny apartment once a month for a mere forty bucks, was out of the question. To tell the truth would not have served to impress his friend. Like many he was buying more than a clean apartment and the illusion of shampooed orientals and waxed kitchen cabinets, he was attempting to transcend his otherwise modest nouveau middle class origins. One way to do this is to purchase the labor of poor women and then call them maids.

Men frequently refer to me as "their maid." I heard the two heterosexual women, whose husbands' apartments I have cleaned, refer to me as "their cleaning girl." I have fought hard for so long against sexism and pornography in particular. Here I am in New York, trying desperately to afford the luxury of being a student, moving stacks of porno magazines and video cassettes from one dusty corner to another so that I can clean them off and put them neatly back. I need the meager forty dollars, under-the-table money which, for them, is pocket change and for me is a week's worth of groceries. This is why I am mad.

## Practical Hints to Middle-Class Dykes on Fighting Classism

Tara Ayres

At conferences and festivals I've attended, and in my home community over the past few years, dykes have been talking more about classism—there have been more workshops and more informal discussions. All of the workshops I've attended on class were organized by poverty- or working-class women. Most of the discussions were initiated by lower class women. In my recent experience, the response of most middle- and upper-class dykes to discussions of class has been silence. As a middle-class dyke, I want to ask other privileged womyn, what are we waiting for?

Are privileged womyn once again waiting for someone else to take us by the hand and teach us how not to be oppressive? As a white dyke who has been doing anti-racist work for many years, I'm convinced that fighting racism is not the responsibility of womyn of color. And I'm certainly not alone among white Lesbians in holding this conviction<sup>1</sup>. Yet very few of my middle-class friends are talking or writing about classism. What are we so afraid of? That (gasp!) someone will discover we're middle class? That we'll display classist attitudes? I would suggest that virtually none of the privileged dykes I know are successfully hiding their class backgrounds, while we certainly manage to display classism without ever specifically discussing class. We're not avoiding the impact of classism in our community by refusing/failing to discuss class.

I'm not interested in building a community that isn't home for *all* the dykes I care about. I'm beginning to see how difficult it must be for

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<sup>1</sup>I don't mean to suggest that all white Lesbians have taken racism seriously. Clearly, there is much more that needs to be done in making anti-racism a consistent part of Lesbian cultures and communities.

working class Lesbians to participate in an event or a space that negates their experience. It's not okay with me for dykes I care about to feel uncomfortable in places that feel like home to me. I suspect that this is where a commitment to fighting classism has to start for middle-class dykes, or at least for me—not with an abstract sense of justice, but with a gut-level passion. My political passions grow from my personal passions, from my interconnectedness with other dykes. I don't trust "altruistic" responses to classism. I see too many middle- and upper-class dykes approaching classism (if they do at all) as if it were an obligatory social task (noblesse oblige), part of their quota of do-gooding. The lesbian community of my dreams is around me already, in the dykes that I engage with, and I know that, if the poverty- and working-class dykes are still going to be here with me in 30 years, I'm going to have to get serious about fighting classism.

I perceive two major areas as I think about confronting classism. The first is about how my class privilege affects my personal interactions with other dykes. The second involves developing tangible strategies for sharing privilege and resources. While it's clear to me that questioning my assumptions and my behavior is essential, I'm not satisfied with stopping there, since awareness without action is meaningless to me. I'm interested in fostering concrete changes, both within the Lesbian community and in the larger culture. What can middle- and upper-class dykes do?

### 1. Rethink Consumerism

We cannot destroy patriarchy while buying in, literally, to the boys' consumer culture, in which our self-worth depends on never-ending acquisition. Lee Evans covered this topic in her excellent article, "The Spread of Consumerism: Good Buy Community" (*Sinister Wisdom* #37, Spring 1989), but I don't see many dykes paying enough attention to her suggestions. When we're good unthinking little consumers, we're destroying real possibility of building a community (not to mention destroying the planet). Sure, I'd be glad to share my resources, just as soon as I've bought that CD player/car stereo/new car/consumer product that I need to find fulfillment. Not that there's anything intrinsically wrong with having music in your living room or reliable transportation; rather, it's being entrapped in the endless cycle of artificial consumption that's dangerous.

### 2. Share Resources

Classism means that some dykes are systematically denied access to resources, while others systematically have access. Fighting classism has to involve sharing the wealth. And we are going to have to become

much more creative about doing that. We need to think about where we put our resources in all the arenas of our lives. We need to get over the appalling belief that sharing resources is "charity" or caretaking the "less fortunate." I'm talking about building a community that's a place where we all want to live, not another welfare state/caste system.

Privileged dykes also need to get over our fear that sharing resources has no boundaries, or that it will put us in danger of not being able to survive. Self-sacrifice certainly isn't one of my goals. So we need to think about lots of different ways of sharing resources. Sometimes that may be very direct, as in sharing goods or money. But our creativity shouldn't stop there. For example, there is inadequate wheelchair accessible space in my community for meetings and parties. If I can afford to ramp my house, then I've shared resources in a way that isn't self-sacrificing, but that does build my community. Similarly, sharing the vegetable garden in my back yard with dykes who don't have access to garden space lets us have more fun, builds connections and community, and also shares that resource.

Some ways of sharing resources don't come up because we're afraid to talk about money in our community. When my lover and I bought a house, another dyke gave me a low-interest loan that made the purchase possible. I paid her the same amount of interest that she would have made on a savings account, which was about ten percent less than a bank would have charged me at the time. No loss on her part, but it made an enormous difference to me.

And when we bought the house, it was bigger than we actually needed, because we wanted there to be room for other dykes who needed a place to stay for awhile. Privacy and space are two of the most precious things that privilege buys, and that class-privileged dykes may take for granted, and be reluctant to share.

Sliding-scale or "more-if-you-can-less-if-you-can't" can work for more than ticket prices, from household living expenses to dues for local organizations.

We also need to start thinking actively about sharing non-concrete resources. Dykes who know about job opportunities, or how to get social security benefits, or when a business is giving/throwing away material can share that information in the community. I think middle-class dykes often take the abundance around them for granted, and don't even think about letting other dykes in on the information they have.

I'm not attempting to create a comprehensive list of ways to share privilege here, but to encourage stretching of our responses. I would like to hear other dykes share all the creative ways they envision sharing resources.

### **3. Make a Commitment to Accessibility**

Many of us are beginning to think more seriously about disability access issues, and some of those ways of looking at the world are helpful in thinking about class-related accessibility. At this point, I wouldn't schedule a meeting in a venue that is not wheelchair accessible, but am I as careful about financial access? Is the meeting site or gathering on a bus line, or do I ensure that every dyke has a way to get there? Do I schedule dinner meetings in expensive restaurants (and how do I define "expensive")? Do I schedule meetings or gatherings in conjunction with events that require an entrance fee?

When organizing events that must charge admissions, is there a realistic sliding scale? Is there assistance available for transportation or other related expenses? Do I ensure that poor and working class dykes are able to attend?

Do middle-class dykes talk to each other about sliding scale, and why it exists? Sliding scale only works if those with resources pay more than the bottom of the scale. In years of producing lesbian concerts, I often saw privileged dykes pay the bottom of the sliding scale, or sometimes even ask to pay less, because they had forgotten to cash a check, or were strapped because they had just bought a new car, or had bought expensive tickets to a non-feminist event. (Bonnie Raitt and The Roches don't do sliding scale.) We don't create Lesbian community by choosing to support heteropatriarchal events and consumerism instead of Lesbian culture.

### **4. Support a Lesbian Economy**

Whenever I have the option, I spend my money with other dykes. I go to a lesbian chiropractor, I hire Lesbians to do repair work on my house, I look for Lesbians when I'm going to spend money on a product or a service. Although the ability to find Lesbians to do business with may vary depending on the size of the community, for most urban dykes it is an option. I also try to pay a fair price to the dykes I'm working with. I don't only support Lesbian businesses if they give me a "better deal" than a comparable male or het business. For some reason privileged dykes tend to assume that Lesbians' time (particularly blue collar time) isn't worth as

much as "real," i.e., male, workers' is. And sometimes I pay a bit more—I know that my local feminist bookstore helps support my community, so I wouldn't go to a straight discount book or record store to buy a book or album more cheaply.

It's important to me to talk with the dykes in my community about why I make those choices, and encourage them to do the same.

I would like to encourage other middle- and upper-class Lesbians to write and talk about class, and to start insisting that classism be taken seriously and challenged within our communities.

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# Bibliographies

*If you have favorite articles, stories, books that aren't listed here, send the info to LE and we'll print it in the next issue.—JS*

## **Lesbians, Class and Classism: A Bibliography of Periodical Articles, 1970-1989**

*Linda Garber*

One way to track the prominence of an issue in lesbian politics is to review what has been published in lesbian and feminist journals, which often serve as arenas for political debate and/or education. Of course, access to publishing, education, and literacy is related to class privilege. Because of this, even the most inclusive, well-intentioned lesbian/feminist periodical can never be representative of all perspectives on class and classism.

The bibliography printed below is part of a near-complete work-in-progress—a book-length bibliography of non-autobiographical articles about lesbians that were published in nationally or internationally distributed periodicals between 1970 and 1989. The citations on class, classism, economics and work indicate that although the lesbian feminist movement has been one of the few places where class differences are considered at all, the issue still does not receive the vigorous scrutiny we have turned on racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Compare 53 articles on class and related issues to 188 on homophobia and heterosexism (not including specific issues like child custody, immigration, etc.), and 272 citations on women of color and racism. Many essays by and about lesbians of color mention economic oppression, but the articles listed below are the only ones I have found that significantly focus on class and economic issues.

Class was one of the first differences among women to be addressed by radical feminists in the 1970s, many of whom came to the Women's Movement from the New Left and Civil Rights movements. For examples of often-reprinted statements, see the essays by Ginny Berson and

Charlotte Bunch of The Furies, listed below. Several other radical discussions of women and class appeared in short-lived newspapers and journals. Clare Potter's *Lesbian Periodicals Index*, published by the Naiad Press in 1986, is an excellent source of 1970s movement periodicals. For short lived, local and/or "underground" periodicals, an excellent primary source is the *Herstory Collection* compiled by the Women's History Research Center. This microfilm resource is available at many universities and other large libraries, and in special collections such as the Harvey Milk Memorial Branch of the San Francisco Public Library. Although most university libraries are open regularly only to students, some offer public access to their periodicals collections, and most allow day use by non-students (sometimes for a fee). Women's and lesbian/gay archives in cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York also hold large collections of lesbian, gay, and feminist periodicals.

By the end of the 1970s, class took a back seat in the headlines of the lesbian and feminist media, to re-emerge for a few years in the mid-1980s. The issue seems to be making comeback of sorts since 1988. Here's hoping that this special issue of *Lesbian Ethics* will help establish a central place for a continued discussion of oppression based on race, gender, sexuality and class.

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## Letters to the Editor

Dear Jeanette,

I am fascinated by Chris Sitka's article "Lesbian Rebirth" in *LE* Vol. 4, No. 1. She provides much new and useful information. However, I am offended by a large portion of her section "The Heterosexuality of Maleness." In order to make her point that men are an unfortunate mutation, she resorts to strongly ableist language.

As a chronically ill lesbian I am constantly reminded that sickness is one of the worst sins in patriarchy. Even among lesbians I am not believed. I get told I create my reality, or I need to work on myself, or I am seen as less powerful than able-bodied lesbians. Chris Sitka's choice of words reflects this arrogance toward sickness and bodies that are different. She refers to the y chromosome as "small" and "stunted." Some of my disabled lesbian friends could be described with these words, tho I'm sure it's obvious this would be offensive. She goes on to list male sex-linked illnesses such as muscular dystrophy, or differences such as color blindness to illustrate why men are defective. She continues by saying "maleness itself is a disease."

I don't doubt that men are defective, but disease is not a defect. I would like to see a world without men, but not becuz some of them are color bind or have muscular dystrophy.

I agree that the y chromosome is a mutation. We only have to look at the damage to the earth, the psychic and emotional scars carried by lesbians coming out of patriarchy, to understand what a sad mistake this mutation has been. But we can't use oppressive patriarchal concepts to condemn men. To do so keeps these concepts alive in our minds, in our communities. As long as such garbage exists it will be present in the ways we treat each other.

We're discussing radical and wild ideas in Chris' article, so let's find radical and wild new ways to do it. I am ready to move forward in a big way. Oppressive language holds us all back.

In Radical Dyke Sisterhood,

Raven

Dear *LE* Editor

I have an important complaint about the choice and placement of Ryn Edwards' article in Vol. 4, #1 of *LE*. Why did you ask Ryn (who said herself in her introduction that her study of parthenogenesis has been "fleeting, at best") to write an article? Chris Sitka and I [Chris and Jesse each have an article on parthenogenesis in *LE* 4:1—JS] have been avidly, independently working on our interpretations for years, allowing full attention to traditional scientific research, but at the same time jogging our own and other wimmin's thinking OUT of traditional male forms. It isn't easy to escape the language you think in, or the thought-forms you have always used to define reality, even when those constructs entrap us. I find myself that when trying to think in totally new

those constructs entrap us. I find myself that when trying to think in totally new ways, completely unsupported by anything I've ever heard before, and contrary to what the entire dominant culture is trying to push down our throats, it is very difficult; it's much easier, very drawing, to fall back into standard traditional ways of seeing and defining things.

If one read straight through the first three articles in *LE* Vol. 4, #1, one's thinking is shoved firmly back into traditional male scientific closed-mindedness by Ryn's paper, just when one could have been opening up to thinking about all this in brand new, creative ways—and hopefully coming up with some new ideas for all of us.

Ryn's article goes quite lengthily into the same old standard argument for hetero-sexual reproduction that we've all heard a multitude of times: that hetero-sexual reproduction provides more genetic diversity so helps organisms survive environmental changes. Both Chris and I and several scientific articles we cite refuted that old argument. Yet by the editorial placement of Ryn's article after Chris' and mine it appears (particularly to those not so familiar with the subject) that Ryn's is the most current information.

Ryn begins her article by saying, "A number of my lesbian friends as well as myself have been interested in the question of parthenogenesis in mammals or, more exciting [my emphasis], the possibility of fusing the eggs from two wimmin and subsequently placing the 'gynembryo' in the uterus of one of the wimmin to develop to term." Wimmin, please! Males brainwashed us about the normalcy of hetero-sexual reproduction. That's why lesbians romanticize the artificial union of two female's eggs as preferable to the exciting nature of parthenogenesis—that each one of us wimmin is blessed with the ability to make new life ourselves! And contrary to what Ryn says on page 48, it has been noted in scientific literature that parthenogenesis is NOT asexual reproduction (like budding) but monosexual (involving the creation of gametes—eggs).

....  
I do not believe it when I hear the future of all-femaleness "does not look hopeful . . ." I am encouraged by clues to the exact mechanisms males use to "shut off" that part of the maternal genome which directs placenta formation. Ryn states that ". . . parthenogenesis . . . in humans is not likely to become a scientific capability, at least not soon." This is not surprising. The labs are primarily under the control of men who will never be able to admit the true nature of what suppresses it in us. They may want their all cow milking herds, but not at the expense of admitting to their own parasitic nature. I do not expect parthenogenesis to become a "scientific capability." It is a divinely female capability.

The fate of parthenogenically or gynogenically conceived cells in a chimera embryo with hetero-sexually conceived cells (which I can only assume would be a most inhospitable environment) has very little to do with the success of

naturally parthenogenically conceived organisms. Oh, we'll have the "female-only genomic adult" amazons we need. Just like we had for so many centuries preceding the onslaught of males. And we'll do it without help from the scientists and their labs. It's like Marilyn Frye said in her article in the same issue of *LE*—we don't have to build community—we just have to get rid of the forces separating us and it occurs naturally. Well, I say we don't have to find scientific ways to induce parthenogenesis, we just have to figure out how males repress it and how we can get away from that and it will happen naturally.

Presumably Ryn was asked to do an article because of her professional credentials—to do a sort of "reality check" on the viability of parthenogenesis. I think this whole thing is a good example of how we sometimes undermine our own and each other's creative thinking. Why do we so often, when we find someone who repeats what our oppressors have always told us, endow them with expert status? I am not trying to attack Ryn personally; I don't know where she's coming from or what she knew when she accepted doing this article. But I do hope wimmin will return to Chris' and my articles to pursue the new lines of thought presented there—we need all the original ideas this brilliant, brave and brassy readership can come up with.

To the female future,

*Jesse Cougar*

*Jeanette responds:* Just as you and Chris have been able to sift through the male research you have read, I trust *LE* readers' ability to read all three papers critically, asking questions, accepting some ideas, wondering about others. My trust has been confirmed in discussions with a number of lesbians who have read the three papers.

As you know, I told both you and Chris that I was asking Ryn to review the newest research, and, after I received it, I discussed her paper and its placement with both of you. My intentions in asking Ryn to write the article and in placing it where I did were quite different than you suggest. Both you and Chris mention in your papers the recent research Ryn reviewed, but you did not have access to the research reports themselves. I wanted *LE* readers to have as complete a review as possible. I'm grateful that Ryn was able and willing to read and review the research in about a week. Neither she nor I knew beforehand what she would find. "Ordering" articles in a radical lesbian magazine is always difficult, almost a contradiction in terms. What I did was put first the two papers that were most complex, and represented the most work and thought over time.

those constructs entrap us. I find myself that when trying to think in totally new ways, completely unsupported by anything I've ever heard before, and contrary to what the entire dominant culture is trying to push down our throats, it is very difficult; it's much easier, very drawing, to fall back into standard traditional ways of seeing and defining things.

If one read straight through the first three articles in *LE* Vol. 4, #1, one's thinking is shoved firmly back into traditional male scientific closed-mindedness by Ryn's paper, just when one could have been opening up to thinking about all this in brand new, creative ways—and hopefully coming up with some new ideas for all of us.

Ryn's article goes quite lengthily into the same old standard argument for hetero-sexual reproduction that we've all heard a multitude of times: that hetero-sexual reproduction provides more genetic diversity so helps organisms survive environmental changes. Both Chris and I and several scientific articles we cite refuted that old argument. Yet by the editorial placement of Ryn's article after Chris' and mine it appears (particularly to those not so familiar with the subject) that Ryn's is the most current information.

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## Notes on Contributors

Lee Evans lives in Cleveland, Ohio, and thinks you probably know too much about her already.

**Bridget Collins.** I'm an Irish-american lesbian raised in nomadic poverty in the u.s. I'm 36. I am the National Fundraising Coordinator for the National Lesbian Conference. I believe people are poor because they have no money. I've pretty much made a career out of putting money into the hands of women and children who wouldn't otherwise have it.

**Marilyn Murphy.** I'm Irish-Italian working-class, catholic raised, the oldest of 5 sisters. I've been a feminist activist since 1969, a lesbian-come-lately since 1975. *Are You Girls Traveling Alone?*, a collection of my essays, is being published in May by Clothespin Fever Press, Los Angeles. I'm 58 and love my life with my life-long-lesbian companion lover, Irene Weiss.

**Joanna Kadi** is a working-class, Arab-Canadian lesbian feminist with a BA in women's studies and an MA in feminist ethics. Part of her essay is taken from her master's thesis, *Searching for Words, Searching for Knowledge*.

Elliott gave us no bio. We don't know where she is. Do you?

**Carole Young** is an Australian separatist currently taking time out to discover what she wants to do with the second half of her life.

**Sue Homer** is planning a life of leisure. She is currently playing the lottery two times a week.

**Desiree Bolman** is 34 years old, part of the dis-affected middle class and all the better for it.

**Betsy** is a 35 year old WASP social change activist currently working with low income tenants to take over and control their housing developments.

**zana.** this year i'm 13 years an out dyke! a forager, gardener, cook, eater, lover, community-builder. working to start a community for disabled dykes and our allies.

**R.A.E.** I am in search of an academic job. Women's Studies Depts. intent on proving intellectual rigor object to my unwillingness to worship Foucault, Derrida and other masters. Political Science Depts. are equally displeased with my women-identified focus.

**Tara Ayres.** I am an opinionated Jewish lesbian separatist from Madison, Wisconsin, who recruits.

**Linda Garber** is completing the *Lesbian Studies Bibliography of Periodical Articles, 1970-1989* and *Tilting the Tower: The New Lesbian Studies*, an

anthology edited with Margaret Cruikshank. While working on a doctorate in Lesbian Studies and Literature at Stanford, she works part time at Old Wives Tales bookstore in San Francisco.

## Announcements & Ads

### *Lesbian Ethics* ad rates:

Classified: 20 cents a word, \$3 minimum.

Display 3 x 2-1/2 \$15, half page \$25, full page \$50.

Discounts for multiple issues.

**Fourth Annual Lesbian Separatist Conference and Gathering** will be held in south central Wisconsin, August 29 through September 2, 1991—FIVE DAYS. Play, talk, argue, spark new friendships, renew old connections, and have fun for a change! Sliding scale registration fee: \$110-175 (scholarships available, write for information). For more information, contact: Burning Bush, P.O. Box 3065, Madison, WI 53704-0065, USA.

**Waxing Crescent** is a network of young (teens and twenties) lesbian separatists and radical feminist lesbians. For info SASE to 2825 North Laramie, Apt. 2N, Chicago, IL 60641-5028.

**ASTRAEA** is the first nation-wide lesbian foundation. With two grant cycles a year, plus a Lesbian Writers Fund, Astraea will award more than \$160,000 in 1991. The Astraea National Lesbian Action Foundation, 666 Broadway, Ste. 520, New York, NY 10012. (212)529-8021.

**GOLDEN THREADS**, a contact publication for lesbians over 50 and their younger friends. World-wide. Send \$5.00 (u.s. funds) for sample copy mailed discreetly, or SASE for free information. PO Box 3177, Burlington, VT 05401-0031.

**Hikané, The Capable Womn.** Writing and artwork by disabled wimmin. Donation for 4 issues: \$14 individuals, \$18 groups (more if can, less if can't). Institutions \$24. Outside u.s. add \$5 u.s. P.O. Box 609, Hillsdale, NY 12529.

**Women's Review of Books**, monthly review of feminist writing. In-depth reviews of the most current and controversial in writing by and/or about women. Subscriptions \$16, two years \$28. Institutions \$30/56. Canada add us\$3, elsewhere add us\$5 surface, US\$20 air. Dept. EX, Women's Review, Wellesley Women's Research Center, Wellesley, MA 02181.

**Women of Power**, a forum for the studies of feminism, spirituality and politics. \$26 four issues, outside u.s. \$32 u.s. surface. Sample \$7. P.O. Box 827, Cambridge, MA 02238.

## 110 Announcements

Hag Rag, New Rage Thinking from the midwest. \$1.50/issue. P.O. Box 93243, Milwaukee, WI 53203.

### Conferences and Festivals

East Coast Lesbian Festival, 3rd annual festival, held this time with the International Lesbian Information Service (ILIS) Conference. June 20-23, 1991, at camp on NY-PA border. \$105-\$185. For brochure, SASE to Lin Daniels, Particular Productions, 132 Montague St., Box 274, Brooklyn, NY 11201. (718) 643-3284.

WOMONWRITES, 13th Annual Southeastern Lesbian Writers' Conference. May 29-June 2 in Central Georgia. To inspire and stimulate creativity among Lesbian writers in all stages of development. \$60 (more or less), limited registration. SASE to Womonwrites 91, c/o Miriam Carroll, 1503 Park Road SE, Atlanta, GA 30315.

16th Michigan Womyns Music Festival. Aug. 13-18, 1991. WWTMC, Box 22, Walhalla, MI 49458.

### Calls for Papers

Lesbian Philosophy, a special issue of *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*. Focus is on lesbian ethics. Historical articles and 'nontraditional' topics are also encouraged. Deadline January 10, 1992. Send papers in triplicate to Claudia Card, Dept. Philosophy, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706.

Lesbian Health Issues. Special issue of the refereed, interdisciplinary journal *Health Care for Women International*. Limit 15 pages doublespaced. Deadline July 1, 1991. Three copies to Dr. Phyllis Stern, School of Nursing, Dalhousie Univ., Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 3J5, CANADA.

### Guidelines for Authors

*Lesbian Ethics* is a forum by and for lesbians. If the author agrees that her work can be used by non-lesbians for educational non-profit purposes, this is noted at the end of the article. Any other use must be cleared with the individual authors, who can be contacted through *LE*.

*LE* is a journal of radical lesbian ethics and politics, with an emphasis on how lesbians behave with each other. We welcome essays, reviews, letters to the editor (of no more than 1000 words) and responses to material which has appeared in *LE*. *LE* does not publish poetry or fiction. *LE* does not publish material being published elsewhere, but we don't mind simultaneous submissions as long as you advise us of the fact when you send in your article.

Depending on where we are in the publishing cycle, we may take up to 9 months to respond to your article.

Contributions should be based on lesbian experience, should cite lesbians—with an adequate reference to the source of the material cited, should cite male authors only in extreme circumstances, and should use the variations of the words *dyke*, *lesbian*, *woman* in preference to *human*.

The focus of *LE 4:3* is Incest and Child Abuse: A Radical Lesbian Perspective. See the Editor's Introduction to this issue for a further description. The deadline for *LE 4:3* is September 30, 91. The Readers' Forum on Our Mothers, which was to have been in *LE 4:3* has been moved to *LE 5:1*. The focus of this forum is the quality of our relationships with our mothers and the influence of these relationships on our lesbian lives. Deadline is March 31, 92. Forum contributions will be edited to save space and avoid repetition.

Write to inquire about deadlines for articles. Type all manuscripts double-spaced. We will love you if you can send it on a disk (MacIntosh or IBM, MS Word, WordStar, WordPerfect). Include your phone number for editing purposes. Send an SASE if you want your manuscript returned.

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