Lesbian Ethics

Lesbian Community

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Editors' Introductions

Editing this issue of *Lesbian Ethics* has been an experience of great joy for me and I want to first thank everyone for the support that I have received and Fox for the opportunity to guest edit this edition. Lesbian community is a very elusive construct which does not restrain many of us from still discussing it, being frustrated and disappointed by it, and both loving it and despairing that it is not more perfect. However, I believe that we have and will continue to grow as we struggle to figure it out and work to make it consistent with our sense of what it ought to be.

As lesbians, we often seem to have a commitment to and expectation of perfection that can make us our most acute critics. We are very aware of the damage that patriarchy has and continues to inflict on us, other wimmin and children. Our lives, our issues and our efforts to heal ourselves are fraught with pathos and we have had to endure the loss of some exceptional and well-loved lesbians. There are times when we feel an urgency that makes us intolerant and divisive. But we continue and we go on to struggle another day. It is our very tenacity, our unwillingness to let them defeat us that inspires me to not give up in our darkest moments.

Lesbian community, whatever else it might be, is dynamic. The contributions offered in this issue represent that very dynamism. It is important that we continue to connect with each other and I hope that this edition of the journal will be yet another opportunity for us to do so.

In lesbian love and struggle,

Jackie Anderson

It was great having Jackie do this issue, I'm going to continue alternating with guest editors, although the editors for *LE* 6:1 have not yet been determined. The focus for the next issue, *LE* 5:3, is Radical Healing, that is, alternative dyke methods for healing across the whole range —from headaches to girlhood rape and cancer, from sadness to madness. There is still time to contribute to this issue, write me to inquire about deadlines. (Pieces on topics other than the focus are always welcome.)

Fox

A Lesbian Love Story or . . . When Lesbian Community Works

Linda Strega

On January 29, 1993, I found out I had cancer and needed surgery. I've had Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS, also known as ME or Myalgic Encephalomyelitis) since 1981 and Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS) for almost as long. I couldn't imagine how I could survive the toxins, stresses and exhaustion of surgery and hospitalization, never mind the cancer itself, and I wasn't sure I wanted to. My first reaction to the bad news was a nauseating terror about prolonged pain, dependency and death that might be in my near future, and my next thoughts were, "I barely have the energy to get through each day as it is. How can I do all the things I'll need to do to prepare for surgery and then try to recover? And how am I going to pay for it all?"

There's no way I can adequately describe the life-saving encompassing support given me since then by Lesbian friends—almost all Separatists—in my home community of Oakland, California, or the warm and generous support of over seventy Separatists and other Lesbians from the U.S., Canada, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Argentina, Japan, Australia, and Europe, who sent me money, information, cards, letters and notes of loving encouragement. Some of these wonderful Lesbians I'd known for twenty years, some for less than a year, and some I've never met. Most are Separatists, and some have very different politics—almost all are activists.

I'm writing this to publicly thank them all, to share information that might be useful to other Lesbians in similar situations, and to share the good feelings and sense of hopefulness that an experience like this can give. Like any Lesbian, especially one who's been a Separatist for a long time, I've had my share of painful disappointments, betrayals and alienation within Lesbian community, and it feels wonderfully healing to now

be able to write about an experience where Lesbian community embraced me and carried me through a life-threatening crisis. I could not have made it through surgery and hospitalization, or the times before and after, without the support I was given, and I'm not sure I would have even wanted to make it through. Having been chronically ill and socially limited for thirteen years, I was awfully low on energy, patience and love of life. The love and support I got not only took care of my physical needs, it gave me a tremendous boost of relief and joy.

Seven months after my diagnosis I'm less tired than before surgery, and life has a renewed sweetness. I've been told that because I had an unusually aggressive type of cancer, my chances of having a recurrence and/or metastasis are up to 50%. But no matter how short or long the rest of my life is, I know without doubt that I am well-loved, and I feel connected with more other Lesbians, especially other Separatists, than ever before.

Core Group Community and Networking

My core support group of wonderful Lesbian Separatist friends did, and continues to do, the major day-to-day work of helping me survive. They are: Bev, my housemate and my best friend of nineteen years who also has CFIDS and MCS; Sylph, who is Bev's lover and my good friend and has lived in Oakland almost two years; and Elizabeth, Lisa, Karen and Carol, who have all moved to Oakland within the past two and a half years. I want to describe some of what they did so other Lesbians can get an idea of what's needed in a situation like mine, and how much is possible.[1]

As soon as I got the cancer diagnosis, Bev called all our friends and told them, and then began a series of stress-filled phone calls to doctors' offices to get information about which further tests and surgery I should have and to find a good female surgeon who accepts the state welfare health insurance and who practices at a reputable hospital. The information came in bits and pieces, much of it was contradictory, some we knew was wrong, many doctors' receptionists were cold and nasty—so Bev was making phone calls for hours every day for weeks. Bev also immediately took on most of my half of our usually shared household tasks. Being very sick herself, this work plus her anxiety for me was very hard on her. In spite of this, she continues to give me the most ongoing emotional support as well as daily physical help.

Sylph also made phone calls for me in search of medical items and supplements I'd need, fixed meals for Bev and me, and wrote and mailed notices to Lesbian publications about my having cancer and needing money and information. Bev, Elizabeth and Liz also called Lesbians we all know in the Bay Area to ask for donations of safe blood in case I needed transfusions during surgery. Elizabeth herself gave blood, and so did Louise and Mady. Other Lesbians had their blood typed in preparation to donate, but found out theirs wasn't a type I could use. I did require a transfusion during surgery, and it's great to know I got safe Lesbian blood.

Lisa and Elizabeth went to the Berkeley Women's Cancer Resource Center to find and photocopy needed medical information. They called SMASH (Separatist Mutual Aid Society, Hooray), Lavender L.E.A.F. (Lesbian Emergency Action Fund) and the Dykefund, so that I got donations through all three to help with medical bills not covered by the state insurance. (SMASH was organized by and for Separatists at the 1991 Separatist Conference; L.E.A.F. and the Dykefund were created locally by and for poverty-class and working-class Lesbians.) Lisa took on the frustrating job of applying for the state welfare medical insurance for me, which involved countless visits to the state agency and many phone calls, with all the usual waiting in lines and being given wrong information. It was Lisa's persistence that got me the insurance just in time for the scheduled surgery on March 15th. There was no way I could have done it myself without physically collapsing. The cruelty of the welfare system and the anxiety it put us through was one of the hardest things to live with during the weeks between diagnosis and surgery.

The money I've received from donations means I don't have to choose between medical care and food or other necessities. It also helps pay for herbs, vitamins, homeopathy and Qi Gong/Tai Chi lessons, all of which are part of my alternative healing plan and which are doing me a lot of good. (My surgeon recommended chemotherapy and radiation to try and kill any remaining cancer cells, but I decided not to accept either one because both methods kill healthy tissue as well and further damage the immune system and vital organs.)[2]

Lisa, Elizabeth, Karen and Carol began cooking meals for Bev and me right away, and they still bring us two meals a week now, on a rotating schedule they arranged among themselves. They're great meals, too! They also did our weekly grocery shopping for us until Kate, a Lesbian volunteer from the Women's Cancer Resource Center, took over. That help alone has relieved me from a huge amount of fatigue and relapses

of CFIDS and MCS symptoms. Carol picked up medical supplies for me, and several times picked up medical records I needed on very short notice. Lisa drove Bev and me to my doctor appointments and pre-surgery tests and usually came into the doctor's office with us, to be a witness and to help us remember things. Elizabeth and Lisa bought Bev and me an answering machine to reduce the fatigue of dealing with so many extra calls. Bev sought out and brought me books about cancer, hysterectomy, and alternative healing.

Lisa, Elizabeth, Bev and Sylph wrote a letter about my situation for all the Lesbians we know, and Lisa and Elizabeth typed, photocopied, and mailed it. An update was later written and mailed in the same way to all Lesbians who responded to the first mailing. Lisa acted as a conduit for donations and messages received.

I'm very touched at all the help I also got from Lesbians who didn't know me. Rowan happened to phone me the same day I got the cancer diagnosis, in answer to an ad I'd placed about a Lesbian support group. She offered help immediately and ended up sending me a large amount of money each month for three months, which made a huge difference in my life.

Friends like Barbara Ruth and Jessica, who are themselves disabled by chronic illness and are disability rights activists, gave me wonderful support, always practical and encouraging, acknowledging both my strengths and vulnerabilities, understanding from their own lives just what I needed at any given time. They also showed deep and understanding concern for Bev. Jessica phoned Bev and me at the most significant times to find out how we were, giving us both a strong ongoing sense of her caring presence. Throughout the crisis, I could feel Lesbians' thoughts, concern and love as an abiding strong and gentle presence, so that I seldom felt alone when I didn't want to be alone.

Barbara Ruth sent me essential information about how to educate the surgeon and anesthesiologist about chemical sensitivities, what to request from the hospital staff, and what to provide for myself, and she gave wonderful emotional support, telling me, "Trust your intuition, and don't let anyone railroad you into anything." She also sent me an MCS treasure—my own plastic oxygen tubing so I could wash and air it out ahead of hospital time. She put me in touch with Amanda, a nurse practitioner who shared information with me about her radical hysterectomy and hospitalization for cervical cancer, as well as valuable medical information my doctors didn't bother to tell me. Judith also described in detail her experiences with hysterectomy and hospital. Both helped me

prepare myself better and saved me from panic-creating surprises, like waking up with a catheter tube and two drainage tubes sticking out of my lower belly. Barbara Ruth also put me in touch with Ann, a Lesbian doctor who has MCS herself, who gave me a very helpful telephone consultation at a reduced fee.

Many friends who don't live near me, including my longtime Separatist friends Frances and Roxanna, sent emotional support, information and money. Frances helped me in another way as well. Two years ago she generously gave me the money to have my mercury amalgam dental fillings replaced with safer fillings, hoping that might reduce or eliminate my chronic illness. Though I still have CFIDS and MCS, getting the mercury out of my mouth relieved me of other debilitating symptoms of neurological damage connected with mercury poisoning. As a result, I got through my ordeal this year with lots more calm and less pain than I would have otherwise.

I was busy with preparations all day every day right up to the day of surgery, even with all the help I got. There's no way I could have done it alone or even with the help of just one or two friends. At the very least, I would have been much sicker and weaker, I probably would have suffered toxic reactions in the hospital, I would have had no choices at all about which surgeon and which hospital to use, I might have been pressured into accepting harmful procedures, and my recovery would have been slower and more difficult. At worst, I might not have survived at all.

On the dreaded day of surgery, Bev, Sylph, Lisa, and Karen all came with me into the tiny curtained cubicle where the last pre-op interviews and preparations are done. Under the alert watchfulness of my four friends, every medical person who attended me was very careful and courteous. Then, while I was in surgery, my friends cleared as many toxic products out of my hospital room as possible and remade the bed with unscented cotton sheets brought from home. (Elizabeth had bought and given me a gift of four sets of new untreated cotton sheets—another treasure to a Lesbian with MCS—because my own sheets were too worn to bring to the hospital and, anyway, might have got ruined by permanently absorbing smells from toxic disinfectants and cleaning products in the hospital.) Then these sweethearts stayed at or near the hospital for the long hours that I was in surgery and the recovery room, and were there to get the surgeons' report about how things had gone. Their waiting for me when I was brought to my hospital room couldn't have been a more wonderful welcome.

Elizabeth came to spend that first night in the hospital room with me. She "slept" on the uncomfortable little fold-out chair provided by the hospital, except there was no sleep that night, what with the male nurse

constantly coming in to wake me and check my vital signs, and the frequent loud beeping announcing that one of my IV additives had run out, and the constant clack-clack of the contraption that squeezed my legs to prevent blood clots. Carol endured the same experience the next night. It was so reassuring to have a Lesbian friend with me who sat up or got up every time a nurse came in to tend me, making sure I was all right and that no harm was done to me. Without them, I think the nightmare feelings that hovered close to me those first few nights would have closed in and shaken me badly. Lisa, Carol, and Elizabeth had scheduled for one of them to stay with me every night, but by the third night I felt more confident and decided that from then on it was more important that they not lose sleep in the hospital, and I knew I'd need their help more in other ways.

I did need more help, and my friends came through each time. Elizabeth made an emergency trip to pick up and deliver a homeopathic remedy for me one night when she was already exhausted from work, and she didn't get cranky about it, either. She was downright sweet about it. Bev went to several natural food stores one exhausting afternoon to pick up and bring me a huge assortment of fruit juices and other liquid foods when I was finally taken off the IV and couldn't keep anything in my neglected stomach. I was in a San Francisco hospital, and trips over the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge are not quick or easy.

I was impressed with my friends' abilities to put aside their own fears and insecurities while they were with me during the hardest times, so that I didn't feel as if I had to take care of them. I knew there were some rough times for them, in doctors' offices, in the hospital, and when I talked about my own fears. It also couldn't have been easy to add this extra work to their already full lives, and some were going through hard times of their own.

After 10 days in the hospital, I was suddenly told one morning that if I could keep breakfast down I had to be out by 2:30 pm. So, on that short notice I phoned Lisa and asked her if someone could come bring me home. She and Karen and Petra arrived just before 2:30. They did all the packing-up I hadn't been able to finish and brought me triumphantly home. We attracted a lot of stares and second looks from the heterosexuals in the hospital hallways and elevator—me, in my Lesbian clothes and with an 11-day beard, in the hospital wheelchair, a lilac blossom from home in my hand and happy tears in my eyes, accompanied by three dashing and obvious Lesbian friends. I was quite proud and happy.

Unexpected Community

The outreach my core-group friends did to other Lesbians was what brought me most of the outpouring of warm messages and donations from Lesbians outside our home community and even outside our Separatist community. Many of the Lesbians who wrote to me had read *Dykes-Loving-Dykes*, which I co-authored (with Bev and Ruston), and the book had meant a great deal to them, so that had formed a connection I hadn't been aware of before. I learned that every single message, even a short note on a scrap of paper, means a lot during a crisis. I remembered the times when others were in crisis and I'd thought what I was able to give was so inadequate to the size of the crisis that it might only be annoying. Now I know better. I also learned how good it feels when someone is clear and specific about what she can do, with no unnecessary apologies about what she can't do, and I was impressed by how many Lesbians know how to do that.

It was heartening to get help from friends and acquaintances who don't socialize with me any more but who said they still care about me. I even received some cards and donations from Separatists I've had painful conflicts with in the past. It was a profoundly emotional and aware time in my life, and I felt these messages and gifts came from Lesbians who have a sense of us belonging with each other as Lesbians and as Separatists in ways that go beyond personal differences or discomforts with each other. Maybe life-and-death crises also help remind us of the things we do like about each other.

A Caution about Professionals

In contrast to the support given me by other Lesbians, I was badly let down by one Lesbian doctor who is part of the wider local Lesbian and feminist community. Though she was my doctor for several years, during which time I had obvious symptoms of cancer, she failed to give me needed information about further testing and even falsely reassured me when I developed a copious watery discharge—a clear danger sign of advanced cancer—telling me it was an improvement over the previous bleeding. I'd been having annual check-ups and Pap smears, which always showed negative for cancer. When I asked her if I needed to go to a gynecologist, she said no. This doctor didn't tell me about adenocarcinoma of the cervix and that it's usually not detected by a Pap smear until well advanced and that it's been increasing in frequency to as

much as 34% of cervical cancers. (The more common squamous cell cancer is usually easily detected in the early stages by a Pap smear.) When I asked about further testing, she told me I could be further examined by a cone biopsy, which means cutting out a piece of the cervix under general anesthesia and which causes heavy bleeding. I didn't feel safe having this done and asked if there were any less traumatic tests. The doctor said no and didn't tell me about the more appropriate tests—a colposcopy (to look more closely at the cervix) with cervical and endometrial biopsies—which are fast and relatively painless office procedures and which would likely detect adenocarcinoma at an earlier stage. (These biopsies are not 100% accurate either, and in some cases a D & C may be necessary.) In desperation, I finally did go to a gynecologist and later learned I had endometrial cancer which had moved down into my cervical canal. My Lesbian doctor had told me that uterine cancer isn't a big killer, but it happened that I had a less common type—clear cell adenocarcinoma—which is very fast and invasive, metastasizes easily, and does not give as good a survival rate as the more common types. When I called this doctor and told her I had cancer, she said she was too busy to talk with me and never called back.

I was also falsely reassured by two community herbalists/acupuncturists and told not to worry about cancer. This points up the need for Lesbians to share health information from our own personal experiences and to be cautious about relying too trustfully on professionals, even if they're Lesbians themselves or have a large Lesbian clientele.

There are wonderful competent Lesbian doctors and other professionals. I mention my experience only as a caution. For those of us lucky enough to find a Lesbian doctor or healer, our natural inclination is to put lots of trust in them and to be reluctant to change doctors or even get second opinions from other doctors, especially for gynecological problems. But sometimes we have to.

Putting Lesbians First

I want all Lesbians with chronic illnesses like CFIDS, MCS, Lupus, and Multiple Sclerosis to routinely receive the same kind of attention and care I did because of having cancer. I've shared sadness and frustration with some friends who also have CFIDS or MCS, because there are no organized support services for us. When Lesbians with CFIDS or MCS do receive any care at all it's usually from a lover or from other Lesbians with CFIDS and MCS. There are many reasons for this lack of support,

and many Lesbians with cancer don't receive the kind of care I did, either. Most Lesbians' time and energy is very limited, because our lives are not easy. But there are still lots of Lesbians giving their precious time and energy to caretaking gay men with AIDS and women with AIDS, raising boys, and working on het women's issues and caring for them physically and emotionally. What if all that energy was going towards Lesbians instead?

In January 1989, Jackie Winnow, a Lesbian activist who founded the Women's Cancer Resource Center in Berkeley, made an extremely important keynote speech at the Lesbian Caregivers & AIDS Epidemic Conference in San Francisco in which she pointed out the severe lack of health care and support services for sick Lesbians, while large numbers of Lesbians are taking care of gay men with AIDS.[3] Jackie's speech describes in eloquent detail many of the reasons for this situation and encourages Lesbians to care for Lesbians and women first. I would also add that because it's easier for men to ask for help and get help from women and Lesbians, and easier for heterosexual and bisexual women to ask for and get help from Lesbians, than it is for Lesbians to ask for or get help from *anyone*, we Lesbians need to take care of each other first.

Almost all of the Lesbians who are helping me through my crisis do put Lesbians first in their lives, and that is making all the difference in the quality of my life and in my ability to stay alive as long as possible. There is nothing theoretical about this—I feel the effects every minute of the day.

Lesbian Community is Unique

Lesbians are different than anyone else in the world, and so our communities are different. The heterosexual idea of a community is usually based on sharing a land-base; on assuming some form of het family unit, which means ownership of females by males and het women's dominance over girls and Lesbian relatives; and on shared history and/or religion. All of these give or value sameness, tradition, and continuity. But simply being Lesbian means, for most of us, eventually leaving the communities we grew up in, even if we stay in the same town. And we certainly don't have any shared land-base.

One of our first experiences as Lesbians is of discontinuity of community. Many of us continue to change location, seeking better conditions or moving to live with new lovers. Most Lesbians I know have lived in lots of different Lesbian communities once they've been out for several years. So we make flexible and fluid structures that can remain even if the individual Lesbians come and go. We also try our hardest to create

long-term structures, like the cancer resource centers, emergency funds, Lesbian archives, politically focused bookstores, publishing groups, publications, and annual gatherings, but the realities of Lesbian oppression (lack of economic and social power, internalized oppression, external and internal political sabotage, and a very mobile and changing population) make these structures much more vulnerable than mainstream ones. I think most of us depend a lot more on friendship networks, loose networks based on political alliances, and groups that usually have been organized recently.

For me, my immediate friends are my core community, and we all have been able to reach out for support through groups created by Lesbians during the past few years, as well as connecting with informal networks of friends, political allies, and acquaintances. Every Lesbian in my core friendship group now knows how to create the kind of support group that is helping me. She can initiate and inspire the same kind of thing anywhere she goes where other Lesbians are willing and able to participate. Some friends had already learned skills in other communities—Lisa had worked with the Mary-Helen Mautner Project for Lesbians with Cancer in Washington, DC, before she came to Oakland. Lesbian community is what we create with each other from moment to moment and from year to year. As far as I know, it's very recent in Earth's known history that huge numbers of Lesbians from different continents have known about each other and been able to communicate and organize on a global level. Lesbian Separatists and Lesbians with separatist inclinations have done the most to make this happen, because our putting Lesbians first in everything we do means we work harder to make connections with Lesbians everywhere. Lesbians who want community building to continue need to know that attacks against individual Separatists and against Separatist politics are attacks on Lesbians' ability to build and maintain communities that will support and improve all our lives. I know there is a beginning global Lesbian community, because my support network included Lesbians from the United States, Canada, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Argentina, Japan, Australia, and Europe.

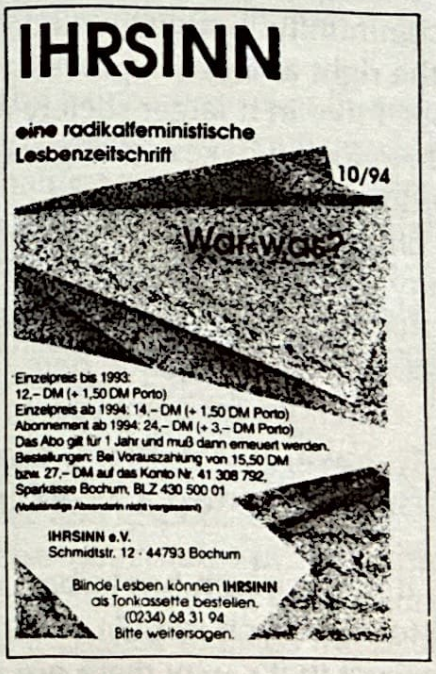
It's been amazing to me that someone like me, who can hardly ever go out to be with other Lesbians because of CFIDS and MCS, can receive support of all kinds from almost a hundred Lesbians on different parts of the planet. From now on I'm going to object even more strongly when any Lesbian cynically says, "What Lesbian community? There isn't any." There sure is. There are in fact lots of overlapping and interconnected Lesbian communities, and they exist because Lesbians create them over and over again.

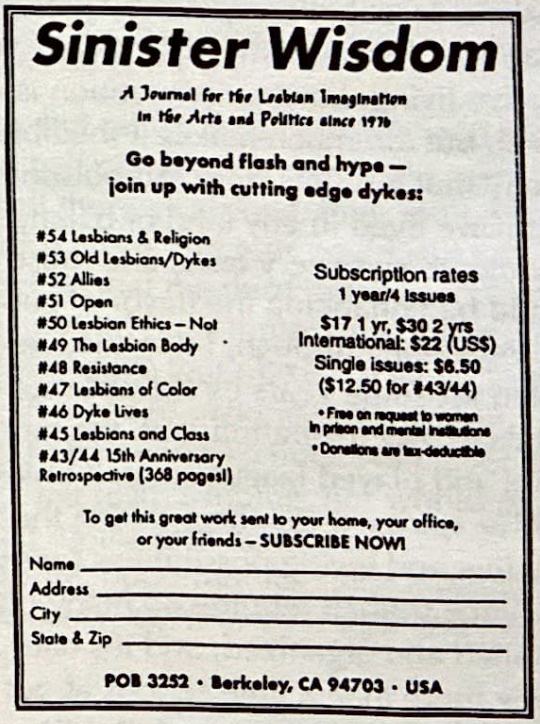
Endnotes

[1]I would be happy to share more details about my support network, and also about my experiences dealing with cancer so far, including what the radical hysterectomy and hospitalization were like, how I dealt with having chemical sensitivities in the hospital, and what I'm doing instead of radiation and chemotherapy. I also have difficult-to-find information about mercury amalgam dental filling replacement. Write me at P.O. Box 9806, Oakland, CA 94613.

[2]The decision to accept or refuse chemotherapy and radiation is a very personal and difficult one. Because we can't rely on doctors to tell us all the risks involved, it's important to keep asking our doctors questions and to ask for help gathering as much information as possible through friends and acquaintances, Lesbians' and women's cancer resource centers, medical journals and books. An excellent politically focused anthology is *1 in 3: Women with Cancer Confront an Epidemic*, Judith Brady, Ed., Cleis Press (P.O. Box 8933, Pittsburgh, PA 15221 and P.O. Box 14684, San Francisco, CA 94114) 1991.

[3]Jackie Winnow, "Lesbians Working on AIDS: Assessing the Impact on Health Care for Women." *Out/Look* No. 5, Summer 1989. Edited versions were published as "Lesbians Evolving Health Care: Our Lives Depend on It," in *Cancer as a Women's Issue*, Midge Stocker, Ed., Third Side Press, Chicago, 1991, and as "Lesbians Evolving Health Care: Cancer and AIDS," in *3 in 1: Women with Cancer Confront an Epidemic*. Jack Winnow died of cancer in 1991.





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Buy Me Some Peanuts and Crackerjack

Michal Brody

I'm not much of a jock, but I like to play softball. 'Play' is the key word here, because how the game is done in organized dyke leagues—around here, anyway—has very little to do with play. It's usually a very serious business, with paid umpires, and league standings published weekly in the queer press. There are strict team membership rules to prevent 'ringers' from coming in, but no rules saying that all team members who come will get to actually play. In my experience, even the leagues that present themselves as non-competitive aren't especially so.

Well, that's fine. A lotta dykes like it that way, and there's no reason they shouldn't have it. Even though, in my philosophical heart, I would make a case that competitive sports foster a competitive outlook in general, which can ultimately interfere with community building and cooperative living. Maybe competition is salt: the right amount improves a meal, but too much makes it inedible. Since I live in a larger society that pretty much suffers from salt poisoning, I hate to see dykes adding more; but if we lived in any kind of balanced world, there could be sport enough to suit every taste, and those who engaged in fierce competition could be enhancing the flavor of community life.

Personally, though, I don't like to play that way, and I've been frustrated for some years by the absence of a 'strictly-for-fun' game here in Chicago. My frustration is all the more acute because for eight years I lived and played league softball in Iowa City, Iowa. A very strong cooperative spirit existed there during those years, and I learned a lot about creative and loving possibilities for the game.

Since softball requires so many players, it pretty much has to be planned and organized, and it's hard to go to that much trouble without being more than a little serious about it. I expect that's why there are so few informal games around. But I'm active right now in a fairly large dyke group, and I thought it could be a ready-made organizational framework for getting a game together.

What follows is the proposal I made to this group, the Institute of Lesbian Studies. ILS is a friends' network which meets regularly to eat and discuss issues and ideas of dyke importance, and to plan and conduct events involving more of the same on a larger scale. There are somewhere between 20 and 50 of us.

The proposal is for an organized, non-competitive game played according to different rules. I synthesized these rules from several sources: the best parts of how I remember playing as a kid in the schoolyard, some of the things we dykes did in non-league practice games in Iowa City, and conversation fragments from years ago with dykes whose names I don't remember, about something called New Games.

ILS Ball: A Proposal for Some Truly Non-Competitive Softball Action

This will be basically a pick-up game, that is, whoever shows up on any given day will play, and teams will be chosen anew by random means each time. Nothing radical so far, but I'd like to propose some new rules for playing the game.

The Three Inning Deal

Teams are chosen randomly (more to follow). If ten women show up, each team plays with five; if 28 dykes come, there'll be fourteen in the field. Everybody plays.

The game consists of three innings, but rather than being defined by the traditional three outs, each inning half consists of every team member batting once. After the team bats all the way around, their inning is over and they take the field. Balls, strikes, runs and outs could still be counted as usual; the difference would be that the third out doesn't mean anything. This way, each player would have three turns at bat.

There are many implications of this change that make the game less competitive. First, there is no stigma attached to making the third out, and no extra pressure about going up to bat with two outs. No player's batting skill would affect the length of her team's inning, nor would any fielder feel responsible for botching an inning-ending catch.

The system also provides more scoring opportunities since a runner could stand on third base through, possibly, eight or nine outs and still have a chance to cross the plate.

In the Field

Every player would play a different position in each of the three innings. These position changes could happen unsystematically according

to whim and desire, or positions could be rotated from one to the next, as in volleyball. A rotation pattern could be worked out so that players had both infield and outfield positions during a game.

Pitchers and Catchers, Balls and Strikes

There are several alternatives to the traditional called balls and strikes. One possibility is to not count pitches in anyway, and each batter stays at the plate until she hits a ball into play. Another is to count only a-swing-and-a-miss (which could be called a whiff instead of a strike). Five whiffs and you're out.

With either of these alternative systems, the pitcher's ability to throw traditional strikes becomes unimportant so more dykes might be willing to play that risky, high profile position.

The position of catcher, since it requires so much crouching and bending, should be strictly voluntary, and possibly even changed mid-inning out of respect for aging knees and other parts. If no one wants to do it, the batter returns the ball to the pitcher.

What about Outs?

Even though outs don't count in terms of inning length, the traditional rules would still apply for individual batters and plays. Balls caught on the fly are outs, tagged runners are outs. Forget the infield fly rule; only one in a thousand dykes claims to understand it anyway. There would still be fair and foul territory. Stolen bases, let's discuss; maybe they could be allowed when it's cloudy and otherwise not. We could decide to count runs or not; it wouldn't much matter.

On Random Team Selection

There are a lot of gimmicks to make team selection truly random. Some possibilities are:

- Alphabetical order—names starting A-L on one side, M-Z on the other. Adjust for number.
- Birth month—same deal. January to June and July to December.
- Flip coins—everyone flips her own. All the heads on one team, tails on the other. Adjust for unevenness.
- Deck of cards—count out a card for each player, make sure they're half black and half red, shuffle them up, each player takes one.

A different device could be used each time.

Odds and Ends

We would probably want to use a 16" ball, since players wouldn't need gloves or extra equipment. However, there may be so many

recovering purists among us that that would be too drastic a change. Let's discuss.

And, of course, all rules would be programmed to self-destruct if they didn't work or weren't fun. Softball as process.

The proposal was received enthusiastically at a meeting. We made some decisions, and some additions to the rules. Batters will stay at the plate until they hit a ball into play or get bored, whichever comes first. Runners can call Time Out mid-play for wheezing or catching their breath. Batters don't have to do their own running, there can be pinch runners. One of the dykes at the meeting thought that meant that the infielders would pinch the runners as they came around the bases. That could certainly happen. One dyke suggested that we call it something other than "ball," and we will. At the time we thought "egg" sounded pretty good, but on further reflection, I don't think I'd want to hit an egg. We'll figure it out.

We haven't played as yet; as I write, there's still a lot of snow on the ground. But I have a feeling it's gonna be a great summer.

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Pagoda, Temple of Love, 1994

Marilyn Murphy

This article is dedicated to Morgana MacVicar, one of Pagoda's founding mothers, who has kept her faith and her vision of a Lesbian feminist spiritual and cultural center, and a community to support it, through all of Pagoda's growing pains. She is an inspiration to all of us.

Irene Weiss and I have lived at the Pagoda since December, 1987. We live with two cats in a cottage (850 square feet) that suits us perfectly. Irene is retired and I write, so we are almost always home, unless we are RVing. Residing at the Pagoda gives us the opportunity to live totally Lesbian-centered lives. Our days are filled with Lesbians and Lesbian drama, an exhilarating, frustrating, satisfying, meaningful, hilarious, painful, sometimes peaceful and endlessly interesting experience. We attend all the events and meetings, formal and informal. We meet many, though not all, of the hundreds of visitors to the Pagoda. In the first two years, we would have left many times, if we hadn't paid in full for our cottage, and spent thousands more renovating it—at least, that is what we told ourselves at the time. Since then, we talk about leaving only once in a while. Mostly we love living here. However, the changes that occurred with Pagoda's expansion, and which created an atmosphere in which Irene and I are comfortable, have alienated a few long-time residents and supporters. They would have written a different essay.

The Pagoda is a Lesbian residential community in St. Augustine, Florida, just over the sand dunes from the Atlantic Ocean. At the present time, twenty-one Lesbians live, more or less compatibly, in its fourteen small, fifty year old, Lesbian owned cottages. Six cottages are rented by Lesbians from owners who do not want to live at the Pagoda any longer or who are temporarily living elsewhere. The Pagoda community was seventeen years old on July 7, 1994.

The Pagoda is also the "Pagoda, Temple of Love," a two and a half story beach house that is incorporated as a tax-exempt temple of

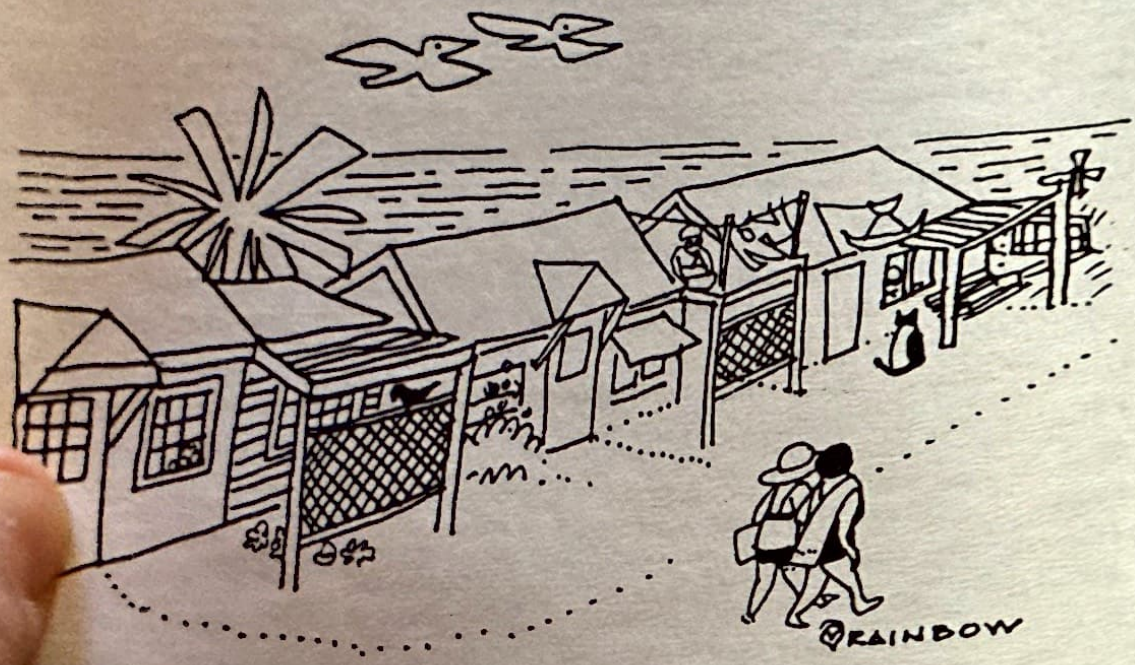
woman-centered worship, culture, and activities. We call it the Center, for short. The Center houses a meeting space/lounge, five bedrooms (one of which doubles as a library), two bathrooms and kitchens, a small theater, and includes an adjacent, nudity-optional swimming pool. It supports itself by donations from supporters, who give at least fifteen dollars a month and stay free when they visit, and from visitors, who donate fifteen dollars per night per woman to stay, and by donations from our theater guests. Each year, hundreds of women, mostly Lesbians, come to Pagoda from all over the country, and from Canada, Australia and Europe, to participate in Pagoda's ceremonies, celebrations and parties, to rest and vacation, to splash in the pool and to attend concerts, plays, readings, workshops and art exhibits in Pagoda's women-only space. Most residents, supporters and guests think of the Center as a healing space, a place where we can renew our spirits, exhausted from the daily struggle of living in the patriarchy.

The Pagoda is, and is not, an intentional community. In the beginning, the women bought the beach house and four cottages (one strip of a run-down cottage motel) because they wanted a safe place, their own place in which to explore women's spirituality and to produce Lesbian feminist theater. The women built their theater in the beach house and were renovating the rest of the building, when much of their work was destroyed by fire, and they had to start all over again. The purchase of a second strip of adjacent cottages followed soon after, bringing with it the possibility of developing an intentional, residential Lesbian community. However, the women did not have the money or the unanimity to own the land/cottages in common. As a result, they didn't then, and we do not now, have control over who owns or rents at the Pagoda. All our agreements are dependent upon the dedication and ethics of the individual Lesbian. So far, most infractions have not been serious, which is amazing given the intensity of the conflicts Pagoda Lesbians have lived through.

Problems with the lack of community control developed immediately, when some of the original owners became uncomfortable with their women-only policy after they lived by it for a while. Most sold their cottages to other women, but some moved out and rented their cottages to anyone, including men. This violation of women-only space lasted a short time because women buyers were found. In order to have some control over who lives at the Pagoda, the women created a "cottage eligibility" list comprised of Center supporters ranked according to length of support. When a cottage came up for sale, Lesbians on the list were notified, giving the residents some assurance that the new owner had some

interest in, and commitment to the Center and community. However, due to changing times, this and another thoughtful Cottage Association agreement are having a deleterious effect on the community, in my opinion.

Because Pagoda women wanted to be sure that poor supporters would be able to buy cottages, they signed an internal agreement to sell their cottages for the same price they paid, plus whatever they paid for real improvements. With the enormous rise in house prices and rents since 1977, cottage owners could get at least twice the money their agreement holds them to, and the cottages would still be a good buy. As it is, the original price is so low that absentee owners can keep their cottage empty, except for occasional weekends for themselves or friends, or rent them out for a two hundred percent profit per month. These developments work to the detriment of an intentional community.



At present, some residents are here because we want to live in a Lesbian community *and* do the work necessary for the maintenance of the Pagoda Center and its projects. For a variety of reasons, others are here because they want to live in a Lesbian community, and enjoy the Center's swimming pool, visitors and events, without participating in the work or contributing even minimum financial support. Some renters and owners are here only because they can live at the beach inexpensively.

The Pagoda Center, which is the source of so much that is good, is also the cause of much conflict. An enormous amount of dedication and

thought, as well as paid and unpaid time and hard work, are necessary to keep the Pagoda Center maintained and functioning. Yet, only about half, at the most, of the residents (and some dedicated local supporters) take any responsibility for its daily needs. As can be imagined, such a situation can breed conflict and those unsettling feelings of resentment, guilt, shame, defensiveness and self-righteousness. It is difficult, for whichever Lesbians are doing the work, at the time. We must make a conscious effort to remember that we do what we do because we *choose* to do it, and because we get satisfaction from our efforts. Sometimes, keeping a good attitude is difficult, especially when we get criticized for our decisions and/or work, by uninvolved residents and supporters.

In addition to the differences described above, Pagoda residents have serious ideological differences. Most of us are feminists, more or less. Some of us believe in a random universe and others are metaphysically inclined, with beliefs ranging from Goddess worship to channeling spirits. Some of us believe that action is the way to achieve our goals. Others believe in visualization, affirmation, prayer, calling on the Goddess, the spirits or the higher power. Some of us are doctrinaire about our beliefs and others are willing to touch all bases, just in case. Making decisions for the Pagoda Center and for the Pagoda residents' association—and carrying them out—is very difficult, given these differences. Over the years, Pagoda women have suffered bitter conflicts, among ourselves and with supporters, when we attempted to remedy particular problems that negatively affect residents and guests. As a result, our principal rules (our courtesy list) are few: no men or boys; no physical violence; no sadomasochistic practice or displays in the Center, the swimming pool or on the grounds; no meat in the Center; and no alcohol except in private rooms. At the February 1994 Center meeting we added "no visible body (torso) piercing or clamping jewelry, ornaments or items" in the Center, the swimming pool and the grounds. As with the other rules, this one was formulated after much discussion, over a long period of time, and in response to a particular incident at the Pagoda. As with our other rules, only behavior is prohibited, not women.

Class differences have caused much grief in the community, and they still do, sometimes. We don't have an ageism problem, we do have a youthism one. Our residents span the generations, with the youngest twenty-eight and the oldest sixty-seven. Some of the older women give the younger ones a hard time. At present, all the residents are white, but the Pagoda Center is attracting women of color, in ever increasing numbers, as supporters and guests. We hope this development will eventually result in a multicultural, multiracial community.

Irene and I bought our cottage in 1988, at the beginning of big changes for the Pagoda. When the women purchased the motel land and cottages, in 1977 and 78, the original owner sold them only half of the property. It was eleven years before the rest of it became Lesbian land. The final purchase brought the Pagoda privacy, four more cottages, a swimming pool and a host of unanticipated problems for the long-time residents, some interested local supporters, and the newcomers.

What seemed to be the most serious issues for the residents and local supporters, in my opinion, were the ideological and class differences, as they were manifested in the process for addressing personal issues and conflicts. Some interested residents, and supporters who lived nearby, met weekly for "Group." The purpose of Group was to keep residents in touch with each other and to process negative feelings that developed during the monthly Center meetings and those generated by living in a small community. Residents who did not attend Group, and those who did, were expected to bring personal conflicts to Group, and to attend Group if requested by a member with a grievance. Irene and I attended Group for about two years, trying to fit in, *and* trying to change the process enough to accommodate our needs. We were two of the oldest women participating in the group, had working class backgrounds, and had never been to a therapist. We enjoyed socializing and the healing circle that opened Group. However the Group process itself seemed to us a combination of the worst of feminist process and group therapy, without boundaries, accountability or anonymity. Two Lesbians were the leaders of this leaderless Group, acting as therapists, facilitating, interpreting, clarifying, encouraging members to search for the origins of their feelings and behavior in the traumas of childhood. At one of the first Groups we attended, a woman made a sarcastic remark, and the woman who was the target of the remark burst out crying. Everyone was expected to give feedback, one at a time, in turn, with no dialogue, cross talk, or interrupting allowed. This process happened, almost always, when anyone got emotional, that is, cried or got angry. Telling the truth was irrelevant and only feelings counted, we were told, because everyone has her own reality. Frequently, new grievances were born in the aftermath of that process.

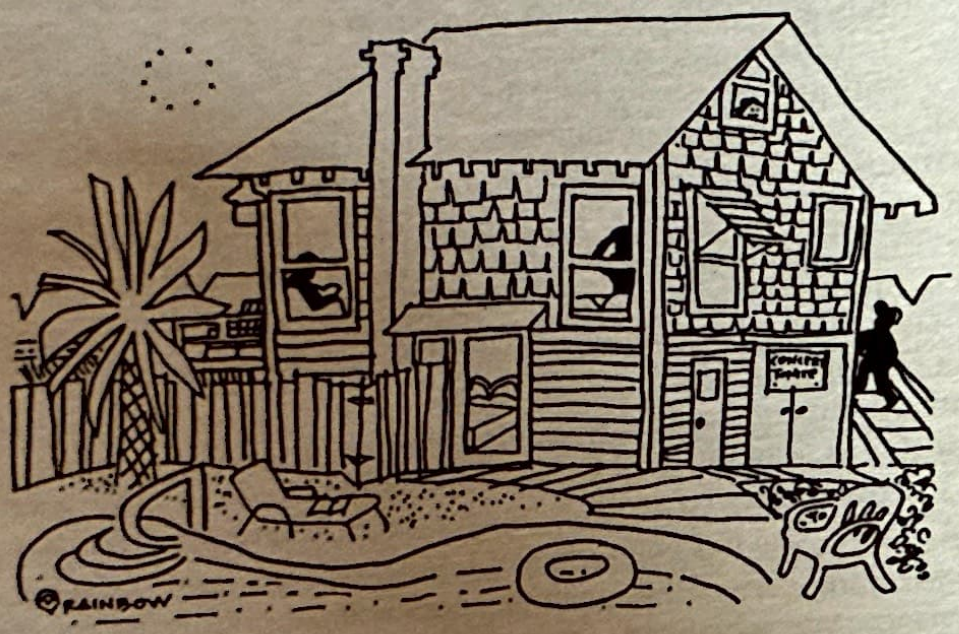
It seems to me now, that most Group meetings included women in tears and in rages, rushing out of the house, away from the commotion, even though I know that couldn't be true—my reality. I do know that Irene and I would come home so agitated that we could not sleep. We had to quit Group, eventually.

Later, we were told that the rationale for the Group's process was the belief that the way to build community was to know each other as intimately as would a therapist. Then we would know why each of us behave the way we do, could help each other grow and would be able to live in harmony. Well, in the first place, Irene and I, and many present and former Group members, all whose origins were working or poverty class, did not want to be *that* intimate with every member of the Group, or of the community as well. We were not accustomed to sharing intimacies with other than our nearest and dearest. Also, working/poverty class women, generally, were accustomed to expressing our feelings, when we felt them, and enthusiastically at that. We are used to interrupting. In addition, we usually hold the truth to be important. We do not cry easily, except with our intimates, either. These characteristics and values made us poor candidates for a group like Pagoda's.

Also, Irene and I came to the Pagoda after ten years of working in a very diverse feminist political collective. We believed that the way to build community was to work together for a political goal, in this case, the preservation of woman-only space and Lesbian culture through the Pagoda, Temple of Love.

I often behaved badly during those years. I was obsessed, crazed, frustrated and irate much of the time. I criticized a couple of the residents, unmercifully. To avoid as much conflict as possible, Irene and I did not participate in Center meetings. We did "our share" of Center work by taking care of the swimming pool and publicizing the Pagoda everywhere. We socialized with Pagoda friends and Center guests. Time passed and other Lesbians became weary of worrying about the Center and quit attending meetings. Group became a personal growth group, unattached to Pagoda business. New supporters, who lived close or who moved into available cottages, were interested in paid and unpaid work for the Center. Irene and I began to attend Center meetings again. Then, in 1991, a supporter gave the Pagoda the money to renovate the kitchen and bathroom. We were all so vitalized by the renovation, that we raised enough money, in grants and long-term loans to pay off the Center's mortgage and to build a wheelchair accessible bedroom, bathroom and kitchenette (that has access to the theater and the swimming pool area), to paint and side the outside of the building and renovate the theater, to buy sound equipment for the theater and air conditioners for the bedrooms, and to repair the myriad of things that always need repair on a house near the beach.

Since those renovations, more Lesbians than ever have been coming to stay at this *still* under-utilized Lesbian treasure. Pagoda's Culture Club, the theater producers, are averaging two events a month. Now that the major work on this building is done, we are able to keep up with repairs, plan for continued improvements, and pay the Center's bills, including the huge, ever increasing, insurance premiums. Of course, we look forward to a time when Pagoda has enough monthly supporters to allow us to stop worrying about money.



Most of the members of the Pagoda renovation committee were the newcomers. We had meetings separate from the Center meetings and had a separate bank account. We made formal reports to the Center meeting, even though it was mostly the same people. We, individually, kept the uninvolved, long-time residents abreast of what we were doing and asked for suggestions and ideas from them. We didn't forget that they were responsible for the continued existence of Pagoda, that without them, there would have been nothing to renovate. They seemed pleased with the work in progress, and the atmosphere in our little neighborhood began to feel friendlier. We began to hope that some kind of miraculous healing would take place, and we would all be a more or less united community.

Calamity struck as the major renovations were nearing completion. The Center bookkeeper came across papers which seemed to show that

a resident was using Association funds inappropriately. At an Association meeting, called to look into the situation, the Lesbian in question accused the Center/renovation Lesbians of falsely accusing her, of setting her up. Her charge resonated with old Pagoda hurts and some of the old-timers supported her, in her pain. The brouhaha that followed went on for months. Finally, she announced she had taken two and a half years of records, checkbooks, and bank statements to the beach and destroyed them in what she called a "ritual burning." The episode was over. There was nothing we could do.

My brief synopsis of these events leaves out most of what happened, and most of the every day frustration, anger, mistrust, hurt and dyke drama Pagoda Lesbians lived during those months. Some Lesbians supported her because they believed she was innocent. (There was no proof, after all!) Others supported her for ideological reasons (her pain and "her terrible childhood"). The rest of us fell prey to a host of unpleasant feelings, betrayal being uppermost. In November, our ever popular, vegetarian Dykesgiving Day dinner and party was a sparsely attended, dismal affair. Then, just before Winter Solstice, a much-loved Lesbian, who moved from the Pagoda because of her personal conflict about the Lesbian in question, and the ensuing rift in the community, died unexpectedly. Her death broke our hearts and shattered our hopes for an early or an easy reconciliation.

In February 1993, the Pagoda Center and Association lured Anne Rhodes, from Ithaca, New York's ice and snow, to our warm weather and fractured community. In her business, Training for Change, Anne and her colleagues train groups of people (unions, school systems, university staff, faculty, administration and students, as well as social services corporations) to get along with each other across sex, race, class, disability, sexual preference and age differences. She also mediates the tangled webs we Lesbians weave in our groups and communities. In one intense weekend, Anne worked miracles with Pagoda's process-jaded Lesbians. Enough was said, by the Lesbian who burned our financial records, to let her allies know that, at the very least, she had been abusing her position. The process Anne devised enabled her allies to realize that her accusers were not "out to lynch her," as one Lesbian said, but were deeply disturbed and sorrowful over the whole affair. Anne provided an environment that allowed all of us to talk about our fears and disappointments, and our hopes and dreams, for ourselves and for the Pagoda Center and community. We were happily surprised to learn how alike most of us were in our love for Pagoda. The experience was a healing one for all but three or four of the nineteen Lesbians attending.

It's been two years since our weekend with Anne Rhodes. We have had to make decisions for a joint Center and Association project which cost more than a thousand dollars. The project was completed without a hitch and with the cooperation of all but one Association member. In July 93 the Center celebrated her "Sweet Sixteen" birthday with a party and entertainment, some by residents on all sides of the rift. We thought it was a great success. I noticed residents who used to shun the swimming pool joined in the camaraderie during the summer. More than ever, Lesbians stand around on Dyke Lane, chatting with each other and with our visitors. Our Hallowmass celebration, in 1993, included a croning ceremony and party for two Lesbians over fifty, a resident and a supporter. Ideological diversity reigned in the committee which planned the event and in the party itself. The celebration of aging was so moving, and such fun, that two, and maybe three residents (random universe believers) asked to be croned the next Hallowmass. Dykesgiving Day, Winter Solstice celebrations and salon and our New Year's Eve concert were filled with Lesbians, camaraderie and happiness. At the January Center meeting, we decided to start meeting to revisit the policies and practices of the Pagoda Association and Center, with the intention of making them congruent with our present situation.

I think most of us Pagoda dykes are learning to allow each other to be as different as we really are. We are learning that there are many ways to build community spirit at the Pagoda. One way is to formally organize and then enjoy celebrations and cultural events—and to hang out at the swimming pool. Another way we have learned to increase community feeling is through more informal events. For example, every Thursday, ten to twenty-five residents, local supporters and Center guests eat dinner together at the restaurant on our corner. We take over the non-smoking room and fill it with Lesbian laughter. Sometimes, after dinner, some of us go to one of the cottages and watch an old movie—"Gaslight" was a winner—or a new video—we loved "The Making of 'The Changer and the Changed'." Pagoda is a much happier place to live and to visit when the residents are celebrating, working or playing together. Come visit us!

Lesbian Space: Wimmin Born Wimmin/ Man Made Wimmin—Whose Space Is It?*

Jacqueline Anderson

The March/April 1993 issue of *Lesbian Connection* contained a number of letters referring to an incident at the Michigan Women's Music Festival (1992) where a transexual was asked to leave the festival. Virtually all of the letters were in support of the transexual's presence at the festival and were vehement in their support. In general, the views were civil libertarian, that is, denying the transexual's right to be there is not different from the homophobic bigotry of the larger society. This view supposed the transexual's right to define as a womon. One letter offered a chromosomal argument concerning the presence of XX in some men and XY in some wimmin, suggesting that biology should not be decisive in identifying who is a man and who is a womon.

The vehemence of the letters was very disturbing. It felt as if these wimmin believed that things were so in order in the larger society that there might not be any reason for this space to be designated as for wimmin born wimmin. More disturbing, however, was that it seemed to be generally accepted that being a womon could be accomplished by "feeling like a womon" and being surgically provided with female genitals.

It seems to me that this speaks to a few important differences between now and the past with respect to what this festival means to lesbians. I believe that in the past "Women's" was viewed as a code word for lesbian's and that the festival was understood to be a lesbian festival which was open to het wimmin willing to be in and respectful of lesbian space. Even though the festival was a place to play and be free in ways not possible in our non-festival lives, the political significance of having such a

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*This paper was first delivered May 20, 1993 at the WITCH Lecture Series, Jamaica Plains, MA, and then on May 21, 1993 at Lesbians for Lesbians (LFL), Northampton, MA.

space was not lost on many participants. I would argue that Michigan represented for many lesbians a victory, that is, that it was much more than a lesbian music festival.

Michigan meant, and continues to mean, I believe, lesbian independence and autonomy. It is a space created with lesbian energy, for lesbians and other wimmin. It provides the opportunity to live, for a few days a year, in a lesbian community. But something is different now. There are other festivals; many other festivals; even one that calls itself a "lesbian festival." The presence of many others across the country has normalized these summer festivals while, at the same time, Michigan has become more inclusive. There is no question but that this greater inclusiveness has resulted in some significant alteration in the definition of community assumed by this festival.

The merchant area now allows both het merchants and, rumor has it, businesses that are owned by men. In the past, buyers could be reasonably confident that the businesses there were lesbian owned. The addition of the family camping area where boys from birth to three can camp with their mothers and the rest of us means the presence of males in what had been wimmin only space. It also means that lesbians who bring girl children to be with them without the presence of little boys have lost this possibility to some extent. These differences are not insignificant and may have some unanticipated consequences in the future.

A lesbian music festival and a festival of wimmin's music are different. They create different atmospheres and different kinds of community. It seems to me that Michigan is perilously close to becoming a festival of wimmin's music. Who has a right to attend hinges, to a great degree, on which identity is chosen and it would be better if that decision is not forced by a crisis. The larger issue here, however, concerns the meaning of "wimmin only" and "lesbian only," for we cannot protect spaces that we designate as our own if we are not clear about what constitutes being a member of our group.

The presence of male children in spaces designated as **wimmin only** has been a persistent and divisive issue between lesbians. A common reason given by lesbians with male children for bringing these children into wimmin's spaces has been that the exclusion of their children would also mean their exclusion. Some argue that male children cannot learn to be respectful men in isolation. The reasons for reserving this space have been provided over and over without resolution of the issue. So, I suspect that something very fundamental is separating us and it may be sufficiently fundamental that the separation is virtually permanent. However, it would be naive to suppose that allowing even male infants in our spaces will not have consequences of considerable import.

To the extent that Michigan becomes a "public" event, there are fewer and fewer reasons for excluding anyone. If lesbians and other wimmin were now full and complete members of the society, then it would make sense to subject any exclusions to careful scrutiny and demand good and sound reasons for such. But wimmin are not full citizens. The idea that because "they" have excluded us, we cannot justifiably exclude "them" borders on absurdity. This view would undermine virtually all of the organized efforts of "out" groups by demanding that those with the power to exclude have an odd assortment of rights. They have the right to exclude others and the right to insert themselves in the lives of the excluded others. This second right is given them in a spirit of "fairness"—a spirit of fairness itself developed in response to the injustice of their prior exclusion of others.

The view that a transexual male or female is without question a womon or a man in the same sense as those born female or male is in need of much more discussion/analysis. However, if little males are allowed to attend the festival, the principle of "wimmin born wimmin" has already been undermined and the exclusion of transexuals on those grounds does not seem justified. It also becomes an avenue through which big males might attempt to slide. That is not to suggest though that there might not be other defensible reasons for not welcoming the presence of transexual males in settings more consistently designated as open only to "wimmin born wimmin."

The cultures in which most of us live and have been framed by function on the assumption that there are only two possibilities with respect to sexual/gender identity and the gender meaning selected for each sex has limited and strict parameters of acceptable behavior. Those of us who are homophiles are generally quite aware that our mating choices are in violation of at least one of those parameters, and often a few others. We do not fit the definition of what a womon or a man is supposed to desire and frequently violate the rules with respect to how a womon or a man is supposed to look, act and be. We have written and read much that concerns the socially constructed nature of gender and validated our choices through understanding that gender identities are socially constructed to serve purposes that are designer made for gender polarity and male hegemony.

The result of these analyses has been, minimally, resistance to biological determinism. Whatever it means to be female or male biologically, it does not mean specifically what the socially constructed idea(s) would require. The fact that lesbians and gay men tend to create cultures different from both straight society and each other suggests that we are different. It suggests that the biologically based social dyad required by

patriarchy is false. Our capacity for constructing and defining our 'selves' is unquestionably rich.

The claim most commonly associated with transexuals is that they are biological errors, that is, in the wrong body. Since there is now the technology to change one's genitals, it is possible to "correct" this error. However, it does not seem inappropriate to question both the claim and the nature of the "error." If a womon is born with the wrong set of genitals and this can now be correct surgically, then it would, of course, be morally and politically wrong to not welcome that womon as if she were born with the "right" set of genitals. Genitals, however, are not the issue; nor, in some cases, are chromosomes.

The issue raised by the claim that transexual males who identify as lesbians suffer an injustice if they are not, without question, welcomed into any lesbian community is in need of some serious consideration. If the requirement for admission to some lesbian spaces that the lesbian be **born** a womon unjustly excludes any lesbians, then it is a policy which should be reconsidered. Therefore, if a transexual male can be a lesbian, a case might be made that, at least in some instances, she has been a victim of lesbian oppression. But, one must be a womon before one is a lesbian, so we are back to the question of what it means to be a womon or a man. (I suppose that we can assume that a transexual female might also be a gay man.)

For some lesbians, a male transexual is simply a castrated man; for others, this view is intolerant and bigoted. It seems undeniable, however, that a genital alteration must be a response to some "feeling" that something is awry. But what exactly is awry? When a biological male says that he "feels" like a womon, it seems appropriate to question the nature of that feeling. Is that feeling related to the socially constructed definition of what it means to be a womon, that is, feminine. Those of us who are wimmin born wimmin who also love wimmin and who do not fit into the category "feminine," do we "feel" like wimmin or men? (Hets often believe that lesbians who are not "feminine" want to be men and/or think that they are men.)

I suppose that my feelings are the feelings of a womon because I am born a womon. They are not the same as the feelings of some other wimmin. I am a lesbian; I love wimmin. I am a separatist; I love wimmin and I do not care much for men. I am also aware of other "feelings" that have that are not consistent with the category "feminine." Am I to consider those "feelings" as "masculine," or "feeling like a man"? If I were asked to describe what it "feels" like to be a womon, I don't believe that could respond with anything meaningful that would not also be too specific to be more than a response to a question like, "How do you feel?"

I am African American, but I would have great difficulty describing what it "feels" like to be so. In spite of that, I am certain that others cannot know how it 'feels' unless they have lived in the world as an African American. So one might argue that being a womon has something to do with experiencing the world as a womon; that is, being acknowledged as a womon by others, and identifying or being aware of oneself as a womon. These conditions do not require that the person be a biological womon. A successful transvestite, for example, would qualify.

A lesbian publication recently contained a letter warning of a man identifying as a lesbian. Jacquelyn Zita, in an article published in *Hypatia* (Fall 1992), reports having heard a story concerning a self-defined lesbian separatist who lived and was active in a lesbian community in the late 1970s. She lived in a lesbian collective until it was discovered that she was genitally male. He was then quickly dismissed from the community. In this case, the decisive factor was genitals. If we require that a womon have the right set of genitals, then a transexual male is a womon and could also be a lesbian. This raises another possibility that, I believe, for some of us is a lesbian nightmare. Suppose a lesbian relationship in which one of the wimmin chooses to be altered and the other chooses to remain in the relationship. Do we now have a lesbian in a heterosexual relationship? The only condition in which the altered lesbian could remain a homophile would be for her to enter a relationship with a man. If she continues the relationship with her lesbian lover, she becomes straight, the relationship het, and both wimmin no longer welcome in our lesbian communities.

The transexual who identifies as a homophile confuses us and makes us suspicious. If a male believes himself to be a womon, and decides to be surgically altered, there is the assumption that he was formerly a gay man. His relationship with a man would then be as a womon in the wrong body. It is homosexual because both partners are genitally male. But the relationship does not become heterosexual even after the alteration, at least it is not considered to be so by the lesbian, gay male or straight communities. If he is attracted to wimmin, why consider a sex change. Remaining genitally male certainly provides greater access to wimmin without the stigma of homosexuality. If she discovers her lesbianism or bisexuality only after the sex change, what is it that she has discovered? Has she discovered that she wants to have sex with a womon as a womon? What could that mean?

Consider the stone butch of our community who believes herself to be a man in a womon's body. She may use a device when she and her partner are sexual. She may use the male pronoun. If a lesbian uses a penile device, are she and her partner having het sex? If so, they remain

lesbian because both have female genitals. If the stone butch decides to be altered, should she now be considered a complete man? Is he now having sex with his lesbian partner as a man? If genitals become the criteria for membership in lesbian community, then we will seemingly have to welcome male to female transexuals and reject female to male transexuals. But suppose our altered lesbian had been, as a lesbian, a valued member of the community—someone we respected?

My comments thus far have ignored the reported "feelings" of the transexual that they are displaced in the wrong body. We, as lesbians, as wimmin who have been told that our feelings for each other and absence of sexual feeling for men are both "wrong," award some warrant to "feelings." The definition of lesbian for many, if not most of us, is wimmin loving wimmin. But what if a lesbian does not "feel" like a womon? What if she "feels" like a man. Does she still count as a lesbian? Presently, of course, she does. What then is the status of her man-like feelings?

The normative relationship between female and male, feminine and masculine, womon and man is configured narrowly and there is little tolerance for deviance. Acting like a womon or a man is certainly not problematic. But how does one know if one is experiencing as a womon or a man. For example, I might act in ways like a man and enjoy the activities associated with men, including sex with wimmin. These actions make me feel certain ways. Are those the ways a man feels when he does the same things? What man? Can I be certain that I am not being man-like, that is, imitating a constructed idea of man? One possible way out of this confusion would be to re-construct the gender meanings—open them to greater variety—then many of these feelings remain within the realm of "feeling like a womon." A gender re-construction might take care of some cases, but I suspect that there would remain others who would still desire to be genitally altered.

Chromosomes by themselves are not consistently helpful in sorting out the wimmin from the men. There is a type of pseudohermaphrodite resulting from a defective androgen (described in *Discover,* June 1992):

> . . . "she" often conforms to the male ideal of feminine beauty even more than the average woman does because her breasts tend to be well developed and her legs long and graceful. Her complexion is usually flawless and she tends to have the added height of a man. Hence cases have turned up repeatedly among female fashion models.
>
> . . . [The pseudohermaphrodite is]. . . a genetic male who can't become male—in short a genetic male whose visible sexual parts are those of a womon. Despite having a Y chromosome, hidden testes, and normal male testosterone levels, almost all such people unquestionably view themselves, and are viewed by others as women.

The article also states that these pseudohermaphrodites usually marry and adopt children. They tend to be well adjusted as wimmin with no indications of unusual emotional stress. In other words, they are able to live comfortable lives as wives and mothers. If this kind of man also identified as a lesbian, would we consider him as one of us?

The relationship between enforced gender roles and genitals and the persistent existence of transvestites—such as the Chevalier d'Eon during the 18th century, and the jazz musician, Billy Tipton, who died in 1989, both of whom were able to "pass" until death—pseudohermaphrodites and transexuals continue to remind us that there is something wrong with the cultural prescriptions. The question, in my opinion, is what exactly are we to make of the relationship between genitals and gender.

While the conceptual and philosophic issues raised by the transexual, transgendered, and chromosomally anomalous are interesting, our present concerns are political. I would argue that the particular type of pseudohermaphrodite mentioned, if lesbian, would qualify for admission into lesbian only space—possibly even space designated as wimmin born wimmin only. This man and the transexual differ in critical ways. The pseudohermaphrodite is born a womon, develops in most ways like a womon, is in the world as a womon. He has never been aware of himself as a man and cannot be a man. The transexual, by definition, has at some time been a man.

Lesbians are in constant struggle for ourselves and our issues to become visible, both in the gay and straight communities. Male to female transexuals who identify as lesbians and expect access to lesbian space threaten us with invisibility. They, in effect, are claiming that anyone can be a lesbian, even a man. That being a lesbian, and thus being a womon, is strictly about genitals and "feelings." This ignores our personal and collective experiences and herstories; our sense of our 'selves' as wimmin and lesbians which may not be completely expressible, but is not unintelligible.

The entrance of populations with interests substantially different from ours can serve to re-focus and re-direct our attention. The stone butch is a womon—may have menses—may have been pregnant—may have birthed a child—will experience menopause. Her rejection of the feminine is only formally the same as the gay male's rejection of the masculine. To reject the feminine is to reject vulnerability to male hegemony. To reject the masculine is to express the freedom to be anything one wants to be—including being a womon. It is an expression of power. Since the cultural meanings of a vagina and a penis are dramatically different, the stone butch and female transexual, to the extent that their 'passing' is successful, gain something. But so too does the male transexual. He

gains complete access to wimmin and, if he identifies as a lesbian, access to wimmin who are not ordinarily accessible to men.

The acquisition of female genitals once an adult is not a package deal, that is, it does not bring with it any womon's experiences as a womon. That the male transexual can pass—can fool the lesbians—does not therefore negate his truth as a man.

It may be that we need new language. For, the male transexual is certainly not a man in the same way as other men. But he remains, in some sense, a man and I am unwilling to concede lesbian status to him when he chooses a womon partner. However, I do believe that transexuals have important concerns. They are outsiders—they too must struggle for the right to exist. Yet, it is a slippery slope to conclude that to not welcome them into every aspect of lesbian and wimmin's space and lives is to practice uncontrolled bigotry.

I would argue that transexuals present new conceptual challenges and unique political concerns. The right to live as we are in safety and with respect defines the political struggles of all 'out' groups and between us these goals are not in conflict. In a world that is hostile to difference, transexual lesbians are among the most different and sense themselves as outsiders even in communities that should, in their view, be the most sympathetic. I do not believe, however, that most lesbians are hostile to transexual lesbians as such, but rather un-nerved by their not acknowledging their difference from us and their using the presumption of sameness to focus our attention on them.

As outsiders, transexuals might benefit from the strategy used by other out groups, that is, come together, define their interests and fight the larger battle in coalition with the rest of us to open the world to us all. It is counter-productive and a legitimate reason for us to be suspicious when they either 'pass' in spaces designed as "wimmin only" or "wimmin born wimmin only" and/or argue that they are identical to us.

Lesbians are present in virtually every civil rights, civil liberties and feminist arena. As a community, we strive to free ourselves of bigotry no matter how subtle its expression and respond to the most detailed concerns of wimmin and others. We are self-critical, sometimes in the extreme. So to be accused of bigotry and insensitivity because we sometimes want to be together as wimmin and as lesbians—in spaces that are limited and always fragile—by those with a specious right, at best, to be there can legitimately, I think, be viewed as an assault. I believe that our energy and theirs might be better used against our real enemies and not against each other.

Lesbian Community

A Readers' Forum

Like a Lesbian Forest

We want to write something positive about lesbian community, so we'll put what we'd like it to be: like a lesbian forest. We live surrounded by forest here and there are many things about it we admire. This is a natural forest, a wild place, and there are qualities we are sure we can learn from this for our lesbian communities. Like how all the plants are connected through the earth they grow in; all the many different sorts; all are necessary and important for the growth of the lesbian forest.

One thing we've noticed is that a forest doesn't destroy itself. There may be a slipping of the soil somewhere, but the bare earth is soon covered over with new plants, anything to hold it together. Only, we'd have our forest full of lesbians, that's all.

That's what a lesbian community is to us, full of only lesbians, and there's not much of that around. We'd like our lesbian communities to be self-supporting, able to satisfy all of our needs so we are not reliant on the hets, males, etc., for our lesbian survival.

Surely it wasn't long ago when we were all caring for all our lesbian needs ourselves. Some still do. This may be the opposite of what many want, but we think that if all lesbians were taking part in all of our requirements, you know, food, clothing, then we'd have to take better care with and of each other. Maybe.

From our observations, for what it's worth, it seems to work for the forest. No one is taking without giving. We can't destroy the forests either or we will destroy ourselves.

We are working on some of this ourselves, of course, the two of us. We don't want to be constantly dependent on a system that has no use for us as lesbians. How can that be any good for us? We don't want to give away that of ourselves that is natural and wild, that can drink the

water bubbling from the earth and eat the plants growing in the earth. We want to be there at the beginning and at the end. What could we ever replace this with? There, that's it, that's what we want.

Raewyn and Cilbey
Urinui, Taranaki
Aotearoa

Reflections on the Possibility of Multicultural Separatism

Is Lesbian Separatism possible in a multi-cultural setting? If we listen to wimmin such as Barbara Smith (1983), the Combahee River Collective (1983), and Cherrie Moraga (1983), it would appear that separatism is only valid for white, middle-class lesbians. I disagree. I feel that it is possible, and indeed even necessary, for lesbians of *all* cultural, racial, class . . . backgrounds to be separatist, although that separatism can and will take many forms.

One objection that is often brought up by anti-seps is that wimmin must have money in order to live separately. While it is true that the purchase and maintenance of land requires a substantial amount of cash, this does not mean that access to lesbian land must be restricted to upper-class wimmin. Indeed, there are several cases where wimmin with little or no money were able to establish a separatist community or were able to participate in a pre-existing community.

This is not to deny that there are problems on lesbian land. Indeed, in reading accounts of wimmin of color who have lived on lesbian land inhabited mainly by white wimmin, it would appear that there is nothing but problems for wimmin of color. There are, however, other options. One solution is the establishment of land that is only or primarily for wimmin of color such as Arco Iris and La Luz (see Cheney, 1985). Here wimmin of color could be/can be separatist without having to worry about racism on the land as well.

Yet I feel in many ways uncomfortable with this solution. It appears to be almost a ghettoizing of wimmin of color, especially when the move to lesbians-of-colors-only space is a reaction to the racism of white wimmin and not an active choice for connection among lesbians of colors. Personally, I feel that such measures, if used at all, can only be a stop-gap on the way to a whole Lesbian community. What I feel needs to happen is that white wimmin need to eliminate our racism so that wimmin of color can feel welcome on "mixed" land while at the same time supporting wimmin of color who choose to live at places such as

Arco Iris. White wimmin have several generations of racism to overcome and we can't expect wimmin of color to hold our hands through this process.

So far I have been discussing lesbian separatism within the context of lesbian land. While I feel that living on separate land is in many ways the "ideal" form of separatism, I also recognize that this is not possible or, indeed, desirable for many lesbians. There are several forms that separatism can and does take. It can range from a mind-set (a separatist attitude) to establishing your home as wimmin-only space to actually living on separate land. I feel that all separatists can find their niche within this broad spectrum. Furthermore, this broad spectrum of separatism provides for a greater degree of access to a larger variety of lesbians.

By opening up the definition of separatism to include wimmin other than those living on wimmin-only land, I feel that a greater number of wimmin from a greater number of economic/racial/ethnic/religious backgrounds will have access to and feel comfortable with separatism.

Cherrie Moraga (1983) has a point when she criticizes the "asexual separatist/ spiritualist solution" (129) that some wimmin have fallen into and which characterizes some separatists. But this does not mean that all separatists fit this model. To say such would be a gross injustice to all separatists and lesbians in general. Separatists cover as wide a spectrum in their goals and wishes as do their "non-separatist" sisters.

One major point for many anti-separatists is the contention that the creation of a wimmin's culture can only occur at the expense of one's ethnic background. "The fact that some aspects of that culture are indeed oppressive does not imply, as a solution, throwing out the entire business of racial/ethnic culture" (Moraga, 127). I don't believe separatists are asserting that (at least not most of them). What we are affirming is that we don't need the men in order to celebrate and create culture. It would be a very dull society that would only let one form of voice express herself. (Not to mention the fact that it would have many problems and would probably fall apart.)

At this point, I become very frustrated. It feels as if both sides are speaking but there is no communication occurring. I read statements like Cherrie Moraga's and I want to scream, "No, you've missed the point entirely!" Yet at the same time I realize that her fears are well-grounded. As with everything in the u.s., there is a danger of becoming homogenized (the great american melting pot). However, I can also recall the wimmin-only events that I have attended where, for the most part, there was a great diversity of styles represented. The creation of a diverse lesbian culture that reflects all heritages in a womon-loving way must be the primary goal of all separatists.

I think that Anna Lee (1987) says it best when she states, "The ideology of separating from males is racist only if one accepts that males define ethnic community." Separatism does not necessarily mean abandoning one's culture. It is possible, and I would say necessary, to have a lesbian separatism that affirms each individual lesbian's cultural/racial/class/ethnic . . . background. To me it is absurd to say that the acceptance of separatism means the denial of one's location. On the contrary, it is only when lesbians separate from the patriarchy that they can fully realize and create who they are and who they can and will be.

I have intentionally left what many consider to be the most crucial point for last. My reason is that I hope that, for the most part, it has become a moot point. The objection can be stated best as a question: "Why should we, as Chicanas/African-Americans/Jewish wimmin separate as lesbians and thereby weaken our straight sisters' and brothers' struggle?" As I hope I have shown, there are very few separatists that believe that separation from the male-dominated world will cure all problems. Most separatists recognize that we have much work to do to eradicate all of our indoctrinated "isms." Therefore, separatism does not necessarily entail the denial of other forms of oppression. Indeed, separatism *is* the struggle to eradicate all forms of oppression.

What separatism comes to is a prioritizing. In the past I have felt uncomfortable with this realization since it seems to trivialize other forms of oppression. However, I now realize that there can be prioritization without denial. In other words, the call to lesbian separatism is not the denial of racism or any of the other myriad of "isms." What gives lesbian separatism this priority is a realization of the differences between the powers involved.

All men are potential rapists. No matter how oppressed a man is, he still has recourse to the oppression of wimmin. Wimmin's power, however, is only provisional. She can oppress only so far as the patriarchy will allow her. Once a womon has rejected the patriarchy, she has also rejected all claims to official power (although she may still have racist attitudes and behaviors). Furthermore, a full lesbian separatism entails a separation from *all* of patriarchy, including patriarchal values. The unlearning of racism is a necessary part of the separation. It is from this understanding that I can feel comfortable claiming the priority of lesbian separatism.

Lesbian separatism is not the immediate curative for all of wimmin's oppressions. It is only the beginning, but separatism is the necessary starting point for the eventual solution to oppression. I have intentionally refused to defend separatism as a whole, because I feel separatism

shouldn't have to be defended. Like others, I am tired of fighting for my position. I therefore choose to deal with issues within separatism such as the implications of a multicultural framework as a way to build a perfect Dykeville.

Pam Bailey

Anna Lee, letter, *Womanews*, October 1987, 15.

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Combahee River Collective. A Black Feminist Statement. In, Moraga and Anzaldua, 210-219.

Cherrie Moraga. *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca paso por sus labios* (Boston: South End, 1983).

Joyce Cheney, ed. *Lesbian Land* (Minneapolis: Word Weavers, 1985)

Tiffani's Lament

I am 22 years old and officially came out as a Lesbian Separatist at the April 25, 1993, March in Washington DC.

But I have had Separatist leanings for about three years. Andrea Dworkin's book, *Intercourse*, was the first book on feminist theory that I had ever read and it helped me to identify as a radical feminist. Then Sarah Hoagland's *Lesbian Ethics* inspired me to concentrate on Lesbian community. The latter privately validated my Separatist inclinations while my everyday interactions with men promoted my conscious evolution as a Lesbian.

The result is that I now want nothing more than to meet many Lesbians and participate in building a strong circle in which I can be truly comfortable and accepted as a Dyke-Loving-Dyke. But in my Lesbian naivete, I have experienced animosity from other Lesbians, all of whom were young Lesbians (late teens/early twenties).[1] They were either politically active in gay community and did not understand why I identified as a separatist, or did not understand why I was politically active at all.

There are many very very visible girls who have politicized their sexuality and are active in direct-action groups, such as Queer Nation and Act-Up. From my encounters with many of these girls, twenty-four hour visibility in the mainstream, AIDS, gay-bashing in the Belmont Avenue area,[2] and gays in the military seem to be their top issues. Meanwhile, issues such as breast cancer, Lesbian battering, and addressing and passing

through our earlier/present abuse histories as daughters and wives of men show up near or at the bottom of their list, if they appear at all.

The only time that I have prolonged and close contact with men is on my job. Other than that, I choose not to befriend them or to ally myself with them. I prefer to be around them as little as possible. Therefore, a barrier exists in which I become a man-hating Lesbian extremist who is not doing any good for the "movement." Maybe some of these Lesbians, having grown up in this womon-hating society like the rest of us, are still seeking some type of positive validation as persons from men. They may believe that working on the issues of and hanging out with gay boys (who some Lesbians consider to be "better" than straight boys) will give them "respect." Others may simply be afraid of isolating themselves further by coming out as Lesbians, prioritizing Lesbian-focused issues and drawing strength from Lesbian-only circles. I certainly went through this—being Black and female in a world that hates both, then coming out as a Dyke. At that time, I thought that limiting myself to Lesbians would really shrink my world until I realized that my world would really *expand*.

Whatever the case, I am accused of being selfish, narrowly-focused and "single-issued" (whatever that means). I am not "representative" and therefore have nothing to contribute to them, personally or politically.

Then there are the young Dykes who cannot comprehend why I bother with "politics." Their opinion is that politics are for the older girls, that is, those over forty, and that as young womyn, we just need to worry about going out to the bars, getting laid and having a good time. They want to just "be." They want to have fun. To them, youth means fun, loose, and non-serious. So being politically involved and having a Lesbian philosophy to live by is acting beyond your age. Those who know about the resources, events and traditions in Lesbian community believe that these things will be around forever, especially if the older womyn take care of them.

The young Lesbians that I have talked with generally do not understand that *we* as young womyn need to learn more of what is available to us and be responsible for maintaining it. They do not know that being active in our community *can* be fun because participating in the community is keeping something alive that helps Lesbians and because strong bonding often occurs between us when we work together on an issue. When I say this, the response is: "Well, Tiff's a little 'out there,' she is so heavily into all this political stuff. She's *sooo* serious about certain things."

Some of these Lesbians may still be in the early, frightening stages of realizing that they are Lesbians and do not understand why that identity needs to be "politicized." They may not understand that being a dyke in a phallocracy *is* political.

The cumulative effect of these interactions is that I am not interested in getting to know young Lesbians at all. It is at the point where I do not think that they have anything to offer *me* personally or politically. (That is beginning to change now that I am collaborating on two projects with a young Lesbian.) It is therefore important that I try and put these negative experiences in perspective and hope that there are radical and Sep- positive young Lesbians who love Lesbians and Lesbian community as much as I do. I would like to find a way to get more young Lesbians involved in Lesbian projects since many of these organizations benefit us now, or will benefit us as we grow older.[3] More young Lesbians need to be contributing alongside older Lesbians.

So, although I am generally frustrated with young Lesbians, I know that what I could be doing is reaching out to them *more*, not only to help them to stay strong but to illustrate the importance of being involved and aware of our culture. Possibly a significant difference between us is that when I came out I encountered a loving, intense, Lesbian-identified support system that stressed my involvement early on. I was reminded that many Lesbian-focused programs and groups cannot continue without strong support and resources.

My hope is that I do not close my eyes completely to any young Lesbian that I encounter in the future because of my past negative feelings. I need to be optimistic and open. It is very important that Lesbian culture thrive and it hurts to see so many of my contemporaries (seemingly) not as concerned as I am. I draw my strength and courage from it and where else would I want to be, anyway?

Tiffani Frazier

[1]For the purposes of this piece, "young Lesbians" will refer to womyn in their late teens and early twenties. This does not imply however that I believe youth ends at twenty-five.

[2]The Belmont Avenue area in Chicago has been for many years the city's gay community.

[3]For example, the Lesbian Community Cancer Project is a Chicago-based organization which provides support, information, education, advocacy, and direct services to Lesbian and non-lesbian women living with cancer or cancer histories and to their self-identified families.

To Those Who Call Themselves Sisters

WOMEN, I need to say
I need to speak
I need to say
that someone choked me
that someone large put his hands around my small neck and left
black and blue circles
I need to say
that one of my brothers put his fingers in my hairless labia and
played with me
I NEED TO SPEAK THIS WOMEN

But what reaction have I had from my sisters when I say
"I need to break the silence"?
I have had women say, WOMEN
I have had women say "I can't hear this."
"Silence!"
"Shush!"
I have had my closest friends turn their backs on me and say,
"I can't hear about your incest."

Oh, WOMEN!
My sisters have told me "don't tell don't tell don't tell
DON'T TELL"
And, WOMEN, my sisters have told me this in the name
of setting boundaries for themselves.
In the name
of taking care of themselves.
In the name
of recovery.
But WOMEN! Caring for ourselves does not mean refusing to help
each other.
But WOMEN! Setting the boundaries we need does not have to mean
shutting each other out, reducing each other to
digestible happy bitesized pieces.
But WOMEN! Building community means sharing the burdens of
caring for each other, and sticking around when we want to run.

But WOMEN:
To whom can we speak, if not to each other?

To whom can we speak, break the silence with, TELL, if not each other,
if not other women, other sisters who have shared our horrors,
who have shared our terror?
If we cannot find the courage to break the silence to each other then
HOW are we to find the courage to break the silence to the more
hostile world outside of our sisterly circles?

Who? Tell me who, sister. If not you, then who?
If not you, then who?
I will break the boundaries.
I will break *your* boundaries,
that we may all take care of each other.
I will break your boundaries so that I may break the boundaries
that tell me
don't tell don't tell don't tell don't tell.

For incest to stop we must tell the world the horror.
We must speak the horror.
We must name our abusers.
For incest to stop we must tell.
And we must tell whether the world wants to hear it or not.
So, sisters, I will tell you, whether you want to hear it or not.

And not just the pain, not just the terror, not just the emotions,
but also the gruesome details, sisters.
I will tell the world the gruesome details
and I will begin by telling you.
Otherwise they'll say, "Oh, she's just being hysterical."
Otherwise they'll say, "Oh, it couldn't have been that bad."
Otherwise the label "incest survivor" will become like a shiny stone,
smooth, almost soft, opaque, unfathomable,
A polite phrase: "I am an incest survivor."
A polite way of hinting at discomfort.

I am not an "incest survivor" only.
I am a survivor of one of my brothers kissing my cunt.
I am a survivor of my father putting Vaseline on his fingers and sliding
them in and out of my vagina.
I am a survivor of my father worrying that he might have torn my vagina
but not worrying about the long-term psychological scars that he
has inflicted upon me.
I am a survivor of someone whose name I have not yet remembered
who choked me on my back in the mud on a two-by-four.

And, I am a survivor of more.
I am a survivor of nightmares in which huge bonfires were meant to burn human flesh.
I am a survivor of nightmares of ghouls with razor pins stuck through their lips.
I am a survivor of dreams in which I was sentenced to death, then released, then told, "your punishment was believing you would die."
I am a survivor of dreams which suggest to me that I am a survivor of much more than a choke, than sex at too young an age and with the wrong people.

But all of this, my knowledge and my suspicions, I will tell.
I WILL TELL
And sisters, you may turn your backs.
You may close your ears and still call yourselves sisters.
You can call yourselves feminists.
You can call yourselves allies.
But not until you face me and take your earplugs out will I believe that you are my sisters.
Because only then will you be supporting me as I tell.
And I will tell.
I will speak.
I am breaking *your* silence.

Debbie Dover

Our Community and Therapy

Many dyke lives include a time of finding our community and subsequent years of reacting to and creating aspects of that particular community. A range of beliefs and attitudes about the usefulness and dangers of therapy seems to be common to dyke communities.

Dyke criticisms of therapy cite certain modes of therapy (and so-called therapy) that are in fact coercive and damaging. As well as individual therapists who abuse their clients. Therapy is also considered, by some, innately wrong. Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins in *Changing Our Minds:Lesbian Feminism and Psychology* (New York University Press, 1993) assert that therapy is not good for dykes period. The authors were especially troubled by the prevalence of "twelve-step" and "therapeutic" jargon utilized in dyke interactions.

Claiming that all forms of therapy are malignant from their inceptions, Kitzinger and Perkins advocate political debate as the alternative

for dyke interaction and personal change. However, they never clearly define or describe what they mean by political. Are the roots of politics pure? Have dykes only been injured by heteropatriarchal politics and never from the politics of a dyke or group of dykes?

I agree with Kitzinger and Perkins that, as a group, dykes would benefit from becoming more adept at political debate. Increased skillfulness in our ability to debate, and a willingness for public debate, would enhance our capacity to grapple with the complex issues confronting our communities. Other situations will continue to exist in which application of public debate and/or (some notion of) proper politics would be ineffectual or absurd.

The use of "twelve-step" and "therapeutic" jargon is a manifestation of dykes trying to find language that reflects their experiences. Historically, dyke experiences, especially those brought to therapy, have been defined (contorted and pathologized) by "experts." Hearing dykes use language generated by gynolethal heteropatriarchal systems is troublesome. However, I do not want to silence dykes. I want to listen and ask until I know their meaning of the words they are using. In negotiating our situations and choices, some dykes will continue to use existent modalities. I trust that all dykes will discard words, beliefs and behaviors that are not true representations of who we are and create and embrace honest and fluid representations of ourselves. Perhaps someday we will be able to interact with each other in ways that will make therapy undesirable.

Pat Wasisco

A Real Life Melodrama

Uh-oh—patriarchy is breathing down our lovely lesbian necks—we're either going to have to jump off the cliff or buy it!

I'm 47 years old, a diaper dyke, and I know when people are about to vent their frustrations—and I know who the target of choice for the 90s is. It's us again for the three millionth time. Through millennia of history, a power drama has been played out where men get pissed off at everything and everybody and begin plundering, pillaging, raping and killing women. My ancient, dearly respected instincts tell me it's about to happen again during my lifetime. I think we've all 'known' it for the past 20 years. I think it's one of the reasons we instinctively gained life skills, networked, worked, worked, worked, and played so hard. I believe we're all part of the quietest revolution in herstory—and therein lies our strength.

We live in a world posed at a crossroads. Will we choose repression, suppression, oppression and violence? Will we choose peace, cooperation, cohabitation, kindness, caring and love? Are we to become life-affirming or doomsday destructive? We have no choice if we have no structure, no resources and no plan. I advocate creating a plan, creating choice; and that choice is life affirmation.

Now, I think, it's the time to mobilize our resources and buy land, land, land. Acres and acres of good land with water, trees, wildlife, plants; land with businesses, homes, schools, services and location, location, location. Let's learn from our own herstories. The communities of women who survived centuries of holocaust were the ones who saw it coming and took action. In this age, money and resources translate to power. Sidestep power-over and power-struggle and put our energy into power-full. Quietly pool our money and quietly buy large areas in the U.S. or Canada.

For example, entire towns in the Pacific Northwest might be eager to sell their houses and businesses and move out to start over somewhere else. (Bonus—people with hope get friendlier, less fearful, and are less likely to plunder and pillage.) We could save the ecosystems around us as well as ourselves.

How do we do this on such a large scale? Keep it simple; have a few people carry out a plan and keep it quiet. By word of mouth and personal correspondence, by discreet printed word, inform lesbians of the existence of a financial alliance whose soul/sole purpose is to select location and purchase property. Network one more time as though our lives depended on it. If each of us contributed $50 per month, vast sums would accumulate in just one year. Even at a conservative estimate, there are at least one million lesbians in this country alone. Just take that figure—one million x $50 per month x 12 and see what an incredible amount of money that is! It is 600 MILLION DOLLARS! In just one year! Now multiply this by five years—astounding!!!More amazing is that this is free and clear money—no debts, no liens, almost no overhead—just tons of buying power. As all of us know, pay cash, pay in full and everyone wins. Prices often come down; we don't pay interest on loans; and our land, water, homes, businesses, services, schools, sewers, recycling centers, fishways, utilities, etc. are owned free and clear: Nobody can drive you off a precipice if you own the land in front of it!

Maybe we could instill some peace in a region of this country. Perhaps we can rekindle dreams, take pressure off people, animals and Mother Earth. Peace and harmony have profound and moving effects on

populations. Financial security, a home of one's own, a good job—that's all most of us need to be happy—everything else is bonus. In a life-affirming community, the basics are in place so lots of bonuses pop up. Life is good, worthwhile, purposeful, enriching, fun and transforming. Most important of all, through our individual efforts, we join together to make a beautiful, life-enhancing gesture that will grow deeper and deeper from generation to generation.

How do we bring this to reality? How do the nuts and bolts get into place? How do we avoid the pitfalls of group effort? Once we have all of this land, etc., who gets it? How do we know we can trust each other? How do we choose the women who will handle money and choose location? All good questions, and we'll come up with many others. First, we take a leap of faith. First, we believe this is possible and that we deserve it. Next, we talk it over and write down thoughts and ideas and pass them around. Then take a second leap of faith and commit to this phase of our quiet revolution.

My inclination is to put energy into this, give it top priority in our lives and get a structure in place in one year. The u.s. has a doomsday script set to explode around the year 2000. Pat Robertson, the Christian coalition and others are gaining power quickly. Religious zealots and believers in evil are preaching war, hate, and a return to the old ways. They're arming themselves, making laws, taking human rights away and brainwashing the masses to become their armies. Scariest of all—people are joining these groups by the millions, giving them millions of dollars, and then feeling safe and self-righteous, turning their brains to cast iron—never to have a new thought again. These people are dangerous—most particularly to those things they call evil. In our case, that's us. You, me, our children, our friends, our world.

I feel we must gain power just as quickly, but more quietly, much more quietly. There are skilled women in our midst who have been preparing for this eventuality for many years. They are scrupulously honest, hardworking, intelligent, capable and just right for such a task. We all know them; they know who they are. Submit resumes, references; screen candidates just as we've been doing for years. Getting a structure in place is simple compared to avoiding the pitfalls of group effort. We have an advantage here—Lesbians have lots of practice. We've been "getting along" in this world for thousands of years. If we can agree to not disagree, if we can trust our process, put politics and opinions aside and become task-oriented, lots of those pitfalls will wither from lack of attention.

Who gets the land? We do! Look around you: aren't we the most co-operative/cooperating people you know? Haven't we all created support groups and coalitions and families-from-strangers most of our lives? Pretty well-equipped for this sort of undertaking, wouldn't you say? There are just a few million of us, fewer than the population of a mid-size city. Spread us out over acres and acres, and we will have abundance. More than enough for us and animals, plants, trees. We wouldn't be crowded, Mother Earth wouldn't be overtaxed, children and animals could go on about their lives for the first time in 500 years.

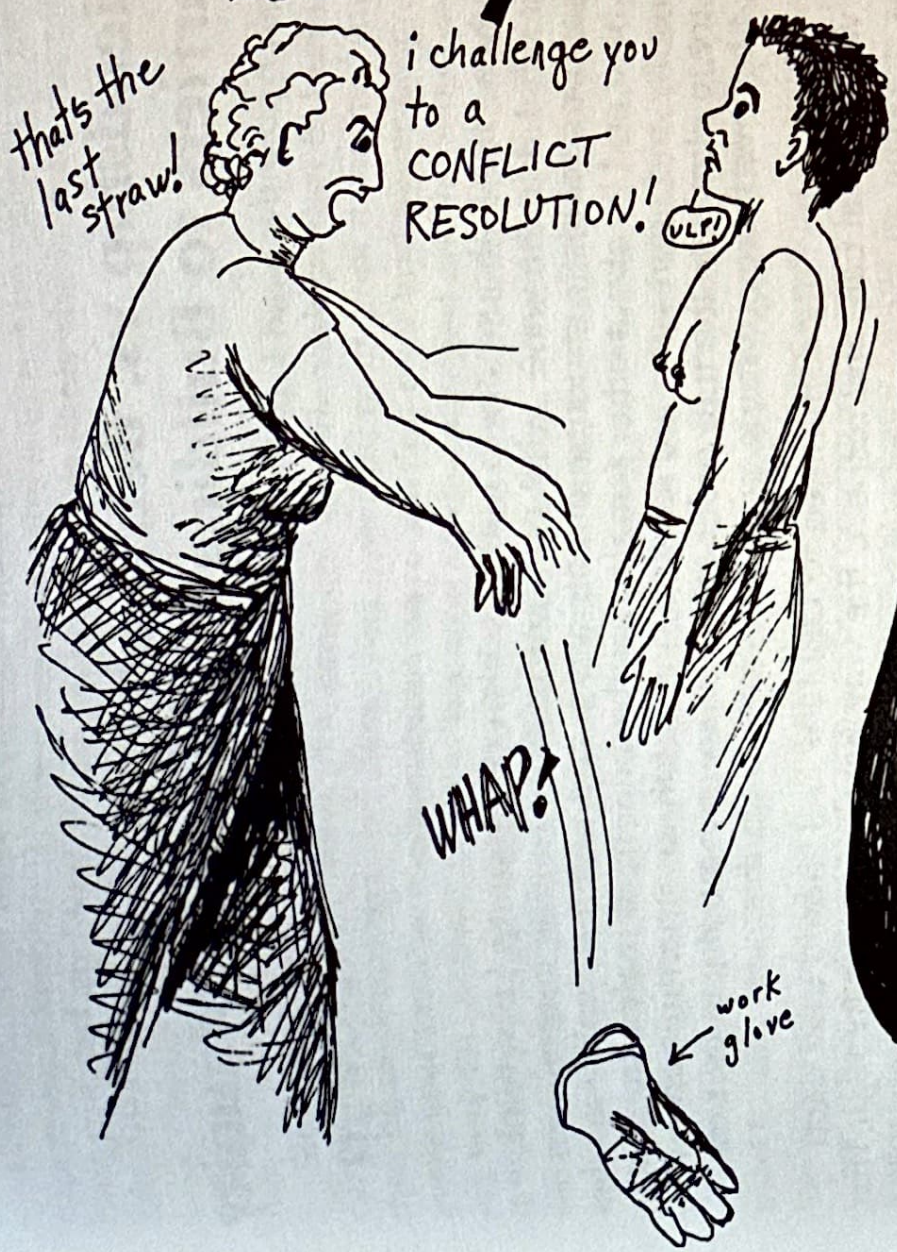
Just for example, even at $1000 per acre, 600 million dollars could buy 600,000 acres of land in *one year.* At this rate, "community" in five years would be 3 million acres of land, homes, and businesses. Now this is truly a powerful base on which to build. Bonuses would abound. Why? Because everything is paid for! All of us would be employed, all of us would be creating more capital and superb profits for reinvestment. Lesbians are also great caretakers, and very resourceful. Put money in our hands and we will accomplish miraculous things.

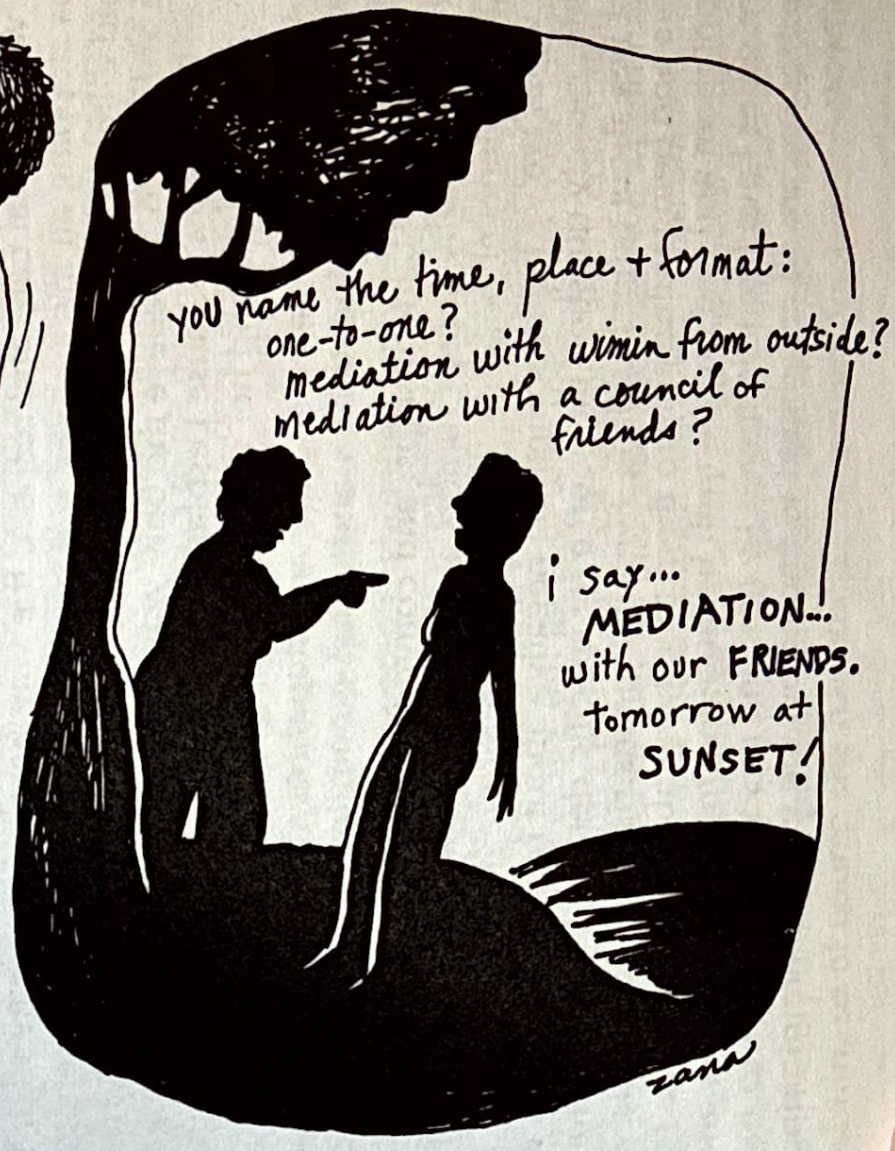
Can you imagine what a generation of children raised in this atmosphere would be like? My goddess, we would be raising peacemakers. Healthy, sane children who become the life-link to instilling and spreading sanity. Children raised in safety aren't governed by fear, don't hate and aren't robbed of their gifts early. Children raised in abundance and sharing don't believe in deprivation, greed or dog-eat-dog 'philosophies'. Bonus-bonus . . . . Women living in safety, peace and equality don't either. Many of us would have the sanctuary we need for healing our bodies, minds and spirits, which have been so assaulted all of our lives. Heal us, free us, put our efforts together and we become unassailable. We could go on with creating examples of life affirmation that will draw people out of their fear, away from hate mongers, and into a "realer" light.

So, what do you all say? What do you think and how do you feel about such a revolutionary possibility? Let's talk . . . .

Judy Hammond

land dyke dramas





Friendship vs. Betrayal: Barriers to Building Lesbian Community

Bev Jo

When I think about how to build Lesbian community, I first think about what is in the way—what prevents us from having community. The sado-masochistic structure of patriarchy and heterosexuality teaches us to hate and lie about other females for the benefit of males. Inequality, cruelty and oppression are integral parts of these structures and we must try to eliminate them in order for Lesbian community to be possible. I believe there are some practical ways to do this:

1. We must be fully committed to Lesbians and should treat each other with mutual care and respect, the way we want to be treated. That means stopping all inequalities and hierarchies among us and recognizing and eliminating all privileges and oppressions between us, as much as we are able to. (I believe the only way we can do this is by being Lesbian Separatists because Lesbian Separatism means rejecting cruel and oppressive male and het values.)

2. We need to value each other and stop throwing each other away, and stop destroying friendships and group commitments.

3. To build trust, friendships, and commitment, we have to be careful to not automatically accept rumors and stories that we hear about other Lesbians. Whenever possible, we should communicate with a friend directly when we've heard something negative about her—or, if that's not possible, closely question the source for specific details. We must not accept lies about other Lesbians. Even if it means risking friendships with the liars and being vulnerable to them then lying about us, we have to confront them and find out the truth because too many friendships and communities have been destroyed by lies, and this will continue to happen unless we are all committed to finding out the truth before making judgements.

I believe these three things are often interconnected: The more oppressed a Lesbian is, the more likely she is to not be valued, to be badly treated and lied about—and the more likely she is to be cut off and ostracized.

Disposable Community

Since finding a Lesbian community in 1970, I have witnessed political groups, support networks, projects, and friendships start to build and then be undermined and destroyed over and over until it seemed that every year Lesbian communities were starting over and never progressing very far. Many Lesbians became so discouraged and hopeless about it that they just gave up. We live in a disposable society and too often we treat other Lesbians as disposable garbage. Sometimes this comes from self-hatred re-directed at our own kind, but usually it's because of inequalities that make us value some Lesbians less than others. Whenever I've experienced or witnessed others being lied about, censored, or ostracized, it reminds me of past injustices, like when I was a girl and tried to tell a friend that I was a Lesbian and in response she stopped relating to me. I experienced similar ostracism because of classism, both when I was a girl and in the Lesbian community. How many of us is this true for? This should not be happening among Lesbians.

Perhaps because Lesbians are more likely to cut off our oppressors, including abusive family members, we may sometimes seem more quick to cut each other off as well, but I don't think this is an intrinsic part of being Lesbians. Many Lesbians have more deep and real relationships with each other than men or het women do, and this makes our interactions much more intense. Also, het ways of thinking and feeling lead to treating other Lesbians as objects to be used rather than as equals to be cared about. Women who weren't wholeheartedly Lesbians and who eventually went back to men have wreaked some of the worst destruction in our communities, and some of them are still in our communities, calling themselves "Lesbians," and even setting themselves up as experts on Lesbian sexuality while still fucking with men. If we could identify these women who don't really love Lesbians and aren't committed to equality among us before they do their damage, then we would have much stronger, safer, and more Lesbian-identified communities.

I also think the influence of therapists in our communities has done tremendous damage. Too often the therapist is someone who has completely different politics and values, and sometimes isn't even a Lesbian, so of course she has no care or concern for her client's friends

or community. Usually the Lesbian going to her would never dream of following the advice of someone like that and wouldn't consider even being friends with her, but because the therapist is in a power position, she's trusted and believed, even when she recommends that a Lesbian cut off friends and isolate herself, and give up her basic beliefs and politics. The more isolated she becomes, the more she's dependent on the therapist, and the therapist then has a steady, guaranteed customer.

Sometimes when someone will not stop being oppressive and abusive, we have no choice but to stop relating to her. But most of the time what I've witnessed is that it's the Lesbians who are protesting being oppressed and abused who are cut off—those who are being oppressive would rather throw away their friends and allies than give up their unequal power position. (As one long-time friend said before she cut me off: "I don't have time for equality.") It's amazing how long a relationship can last while one of the Lesbians is accepting being in a subservient position—and it's amazing how quickly such a friendship can end when she finally insists on having an equal non-oppressive relationship. When many of those who casually cut off other Lesbians who they say are treating them unfairly (whether it's true or not) still maintain close contact with family members who participated in seriously abusing them (and maintain contact with other non-Lesbians as well), their decision shows a lack of commitment, caring, and love for other Lesbians. Ex-lovers are often thrown away in the same way and I think that's because someone just doesn't care enough to try and work out these relationships. That makes me wonder how much they really cared for their friends or lovers in the first place.

Too often there doesn't seem to be any middle ground between being in complete agreement or not relating to someone. As soon as a conflict or disagreement arises, the immediate reaction often is to eliminate that friend completely from your life without an attempt to work out the problem or to even find out if it's actually a misunderstanding. It's so unfair when someone who's been your friend for years suddenly, without warning that there's even a problem, cuts off your friendship with no explanation, or with vague, mean accusations that aren't substantiated, specific, or true. I've observed this kind of thing happening many times in friendship groups. And usually all the other friends in the group are expected to also cut that friend off or risk being ostracized as well.

The way that many friendship groups are, once someone has been defined as being in disagreement, then she's considered an enemy. Even though others in the group might actually have liked her and would have become good friends with her if they met her through different

circumstances, they have to hate her if they are going to continue to be accepted as part of their group. Demands that sides be chosen affects community events as well as friendship groups, like when a friend of mine wanted to go to a Lesbian gathering but was afraid to. A rival Lesbian event was scheduled at the same time and she was so worried that whatever decision she made would be interpreted as a political statement of being against one of the events that she decided to not go to either one—which meant that not only did she deprive herself of being part of these Lesbian community events but that other Lesbians were deprived of her presence.

Double standards are a basic part of lying about and ostracizing other Lesbians. Sometimes Lesbians ostracize another Lesbian for something they themselves have done or are even still doing. It's also ironic when enmities based on trivial reasons last for years or even decades, far longer than some new friends who are accepted as trustworthy have even been Lesbians.

It can be hard to question a friend who is asking for support, but if the result of our not questioning her means harming another Lesbian, then we must do it. A few years ago I became close friends with two Lesbians (A and B) in another country who were lovers. We talked on the phone and wrote regularly. They started to tell me how they didn't trust and had stopped relating to some other Lesbians they had been friends with, one of whom (C) I was also friends with by mail. Their criticisms were vehement, as if these Lesbians had done them serious injustice, and I felt strong pressure to also consider C as an enemy, even though they didn't give me any concrete information about why she was so terrible. They were much closer friends with me and I hardly knew C, but I maintained contact with her. A few months later, A and B cut me off as well, for no valid reason. (They had briefly broken up with each other and one of them told me she was in love with me. Even though I encouraged them to work out their relationship, I believe that I became their scapegoat.) I then received a tape from C and the other Lesbians they had cut off, which explained their side of the story in detail. They said they had carefully and gently brought up the issue of fat oppression with A and B because B would try to diet A in front of them when they were visiting. Rather than try and work any of this through, A and B just refused to relate to them again, like they had with me. (And with both of us, A and B didn't explain why.) I believe that I was pressured to also cut off C because they were afraid that I would find out the truth and be angry with them. It seemed clear that, like with so many Lesbians, A and B were willing to be mean to each other and stay lovers but then they

would cut off friends at the first sign of any conflict. I was very relieved that I hadn't just submitted to their pressure to drop C.

I believe the most common reason that Lesbians cut other Lesbians off is because of being unwilling to talk about or even try to work through even one difference or disagreement. Rather than try even a little to work things out, they will just stop relating to someone—often without even an explanation.

I've also often observed Lesbians end friendships with someone they feel guilty towards, even when that Lesbian isn't doing anything to make them feel that way. Such Lesbians would rather drop a friend than deal with their guilt towards her. Sometimes this happens among friends from different class backgrounds who have been living at the same basic poverty or working-class level. When the more class-priviliged friends begin using their privilege to get more money and status, and the actual class differences become more apparent, they end their friendships with less privileged friends. The inequality makes them too uncomfortable and their old friends don't "fit in" with newer, more privileged friends.

Another example I've witnessed is when a Lesbian becomes chronically ill or disabled in other ways and her non-disabled friends drop her —partly I believe out of guilt for not being able to help her recover, but sometimes because it reminds them that they're also vulnerable to becoming disabled and they'd rather end their friendship than be reminded of that. Lesbians also end friendships because they're unwilling to avoid injuring their friends' health, like when they insist on using toxic products that make their friends sick or will only remain friends if they visit at their home, even though they have pets that their friends are allergic to. I know of a Lesbian who told her friend of many years that she felt so guilty when she smoked around her that she didn't want to see her anymore—she wouldn't smoke outside or away from her friend, and even when she gave up smoking years later, she didn't re-establish their friendship.

If you feel like cutting off a friend, try to be clear with yourself about why, especially if she was someone you once felt close to. What happened to change that? If she just makes you feel "uncomfortable," try and find out why and make sure it isn't simply class or cultural differences or ways that you have unfair institutionalized power over her that she's trying to equalize. Before any of us make a decision to cut off a friend we should first try to work things out as much as possible, including trying to find out if friends can help us talk to each other. If that doesn't work, we should explain to her, clearly and directly, *with specific detailed examples*, what it is that she's doing that is so intolerable to us. Treat her with the care and fairness that you would want her to treat you if the situation were reversed.

Lies vs. Shared Information

It's important for us to share stories about Lesbians who are oppressive and untrustworthy, in order to warn and protect each other. But too often stories are spread that are half-truths or complete lies that only cause damage, to the Lesbian being lied about, to those of us who then miss out on her friendship, and to the entire Lesbian community. Sometimes stories are spread with good intentions but carelessness causes crucial changes in the story or the wrong person is named. I've known of many cases when a part of the story is true, but the rest of it is not only untrue but is extremely harmful. When we do share critical information, we should say if it's something we witnessed personally, or who told us and how many Lesbians the story has passed through, because with each Lesbian there are more chances for mistakes. We should tell as much as possible of the complete story because a missing part can mean serious misunderstandings—like when a Lesbian is described as shoving another Lesbian but it's left out that she was trying to stop the other Lesbian from hitting her. We should also name all possible witnesses so the story can be verified. These things are important when a story makes us wary or distrustful of someone, but they are essential when it could mean someone being cut off and ostracized from our community.

I can understand how well-intentioned misunderstandings happen, but I've never been able to understand why a Lesbian would deliberately lie about another Lesbian—yet, unfortunately, I've witnessed it happen many times. Sadly, it seems to be easier for Lesbians to passively accept male and het standards and use them to make decisions in Lesbian communities than it is for Lesbians to question those standards and to create relationships based on trust and equality. Part of accepting male and het standards is to accept lies without question and to use lies to manipulate others. Once started the lie can spread into a cataclysm of uncontrollable destruction. I don't even understand the motives. How can someone feel good about what they've gained through damaging other Lesbians?

The main motive for deliberate lying that I've observed is a desire to gain personal and political power, and jealousy of various kinds has been at the root of that: jealousy because someone is attracted to a Lesbian who's not attracted to her and she wants revenge, but also jealousy when someone who is considered less valuable (less privileged) is getting recognition that other Lesbians don't think she deserves. (Lesbians who grew up with a lot of privilege and status in het society often want to hold onto that power in Lesbian communities. In order for them to

continue feeling "superior" or "top" they have to consider certain other Lesbians as "inferior" or "bottom" and they then become jealous and threatened when these "inferior" Lesbians get recognition and support, and deliberately lie about them to maintain power.) Other motives I've witnessed are when someone is threatened by another Lesbian's politics and she thinks that if she can say enough nasty things about her, whether or not they are true, then she can discredit her. Or sometimes someone insists that other Lesbians change their beliefs to suit her and if they don't, then she'll make them pay. (This demand that Lesbians just have faith in something without question can border on a religious-like zeal.)

Several years ago I met a Lesbian who I had been told a story about which made me wary of her. It wasn't until over a year later that I discovered that another "friend" had told her a lie about me which made her be wary of me. Luckily, we didn't let these stories stop us from becoming good friends.

Then there are the double standards involved when Lesbians are accused of being "batterers." Sometimes someone will want to check out both sides of a story of abuse to make sure she knows what the truth is but then gets upset when her friends want to do the same thing after she tells them that her lover has been abusive to her. Another common double standard is when one Lesbian who is accused of abuse is multiply oppressed and, even though she says the stories aren't true, she's simply branded a "batterer" and ostracized, while another Lesbian, who is privileged, very feminine, trendy, and considered "cute," is still accepted and not even challenged, even though she admits to hitting her lover.

The worst story I ever heard about a Lesbian being lied about, scapegoated, and ostracized was V's story. In 1972, I received an anonymous leaflet in the mail describing in detail why V was a government agent and could not be trusted (including three photos and a description that made it clear that she was Italian-descent, working-class, and Butch). I didn't know who V was and I didn't know how this anonymous group knew who I was. The leaflet didn't substantiate anything said about V and it used a lot of male-left as well as Lesbian feminist rhetoric. I didn't meet V until several years later when I found out that this public attack on her by a group of Lesbian feminists almost destroyed her life. She had been kept a prisoner in the basement of a Lesbian household and for a while they considered killing her. Finally, they took her to New York City and dumped her on the street with no money and no identification. Because the leaflet had been sent all over the U.S., V was harassed—pointed out, called names, and sometimes physically attacked—wherever she travelled while trying to find a Lesbian community she would be safe in and

be believed. Finally she found a city with a strong Lesbian Separatist community where she was accepted.

Some years later, I became friends with a Lesbian who had been living in the group house where V was kept prisoner. She had been afraid for her own safety and worried that they might pick her to scapegoat if they didn't have V. She told me the names of everyone she could remember who did this to V. Out of the eight names, I recognized six. Four of them had become Lesbian feminist stars. One was part of starting one of the first "Women's Music" companies (now also a cruise company) which had a strong influence on making Lesbian music sell out and become more closeted and less Lesbian (as well as vapid and boring). Another one is a famous Lesbian feminist theorist, writer, and publisher. Another is one of the most famous Lesbian photographers, and has probably photographed thousands of Lesbians. Another is perhaps the most famous, an internationally known and rich Lesbian writer who often appears on TV talk shows. Two others had moved to the area where I lived—one of them became influential in our community and the other was public about being a sado-masochist. V believed this group victimized her partly to get power. Knowing V wasn't an agent, I was left wondering who actually was.

The most outrageous experience I personally ever had with a liar was with a Lesbian I had trusted and been close to for years. Before she ended our friendship she told me directly, "I will tell lies about you if you tell lies about me." She knew that I had never lied about her or about any Lesbian (and I reminded her of this) so I interpreted her threat to mean that if I told other Lesbians about how abusive she had been to me then she would lie about me. I believe she has and continues to, even though, theoretically, that's against everything she once said she believed in. This has also made me question if any of the stories she had told me in the past about other Lesbians are true.

We also have to be careful to not take out our pain and anger on those who have stayed committed to us and our Lesbian community, while those who actually harmed us aren't around any more. An example of this is when a Lesbian who was part of a collective land group was falsely accused of being a "batterer" and driven from her home and community. Yet when a friend of hers described her own experience of being lied about by other Lesbians, she responded by saying, "If there are accusations like that then there must be some truth to it," even though she knew that wasn't true in her case.

The irony is that so often lies and distortions can easily be disproved because of witnesses or other ways to verify the truth, but because the

lies fit the listeners' pre-judgements about another Lesbian and therefore are easier to believe than the truth, they're just accepted.

I don't think it's possible for any Lesbian to be politically active and to be courageous in trying to end Lesbian-hatred and other oppressions among Lesbians without being lied about, attacked (including in print), censored, and ostracized. Lying about another Lesbian is the most effective way of harming her personally as well as politically, other than physical abuse. And it *is* emotional abuse.

Trying to Create Lesbian Justice

Part of a way of preventing lying and preventing a Lesbian from being cut off from our communities is that there should be no secrets when criticizing her. Too often someone is just described as being a terrible person, untrustworthy, or even abusive without *any* kind of substantiation other than name-calling. The implication is if we ask for any details and examples then we don't trust the person telling us this "information" and we risk her cutting us off as well. But to be fair, for the sake of us all, we have to ask for the facts, and anyone who is trustworthy and wants justice in our communities should give us all that information without even being asked. In the case of someone saying they were physically abused, it's often assumed or said directly that it's unfair or even a continuation of the abuse to want to know what happened, but we should be told at least enough information to know if it was really abuse—because unfortunately, what's sometimes called "abuse" is actually verbal disagreement abut something, which trivializes real abuse, and even more upsetting, abusers often accuse their victims of abuse as a way of preventing the truth being known. It's horrible enough to be the victim of abuse without being ostracized in your community because your abuser has convinced everyone that *you* abused her. (And I've known Lesbians who couldn't believe that such an injustice could really occur among Lesbians until it happened to them.)

When in doubt, the safest thing is to try and treat other Lesbians the way you want to be treated. Would you really want Lesbians to just cut you off without giving you a chance to defend yourself because someone unfairly calls you an abuser? Would you want a friend to just cut you off with no reason or just with unsubstantiated name-calling as an explanation?

Knowing we can be lied about, abandoned, and ostracized at any time is a terrible way to live. If we've been Lesbians for any time at all, particularly if we're unable or unwilling to pass as het, then we've

already experienced that cruelty from our family and/or friends and/or even strangers simply because we're Lesbians. It's even worse when Lesbians, who should know better, do that to us. I believe that the severity of Lesbians' oppression is why so many Lesbians are suicidal and/or chronically ill and die sooner than het women. It's especially worse for those who know they are Lesbians from an early age and grow up completely alone, knowing no one else like themselves. (Even with classism, which I also experienced growing up, I at least had my family, friends, and some representation of working-class people in the media, as caricatured as it was, to reflect my reality. But the only representation of Lesbians I saw were "perverted" and "pathetic" females who abused other females and/or killed themselves.) Since many Lesbians have committed their lives to Lesbians and given up other support, we should be even more careful to be loyal to and protective of each other.

It takes courage to do it, but I think we should try to verify whenever possible when we've heard upsetting rumors about us and other Lesbians, even when it means confronting directly someone who we believe is intentionally trying to harm us or others. And whenever possible, try to get witnesses.

For various reasons, we may be in political agreement about the most important issues with a certain Lesbian, yet not feel particularly close to her or want to be in much contact with her, but that doesn't mean we can't still be part of the same community and share support when we're able to. This loose network of alliances would make community much more possible instead of the more common situation of being divided into camps where someone is either a friend or branded an enemy.

Many of us feel frustrated at how little we seem able to give other Lesbians. But one of the greatest gifts we can give is our commitment to not betray or abandon each other.

Remember that while we don't have the choice about being lied about, we do have the choice about whether or not we will accept and believe lies told to us. The liar can't be successful in doing her damage if she is refused our trust. And no one can be ostracized and driven from our friendship groups and community if we don't agree to participate in it. By ourselves we can't prevent double standards and other injustices in our communities, but by refusing to accept them we *can* create our own sub-communities of friends and allies that are safe and not oppressive. If enough of us do it, then we *will* have true Lesbian communities.

Isolation and Community

Elizabeth Kristen

Already this is hard to write. What is isolation and community? Maybe I mean isolation versus community or isolation in community or maybe I need to talk about all three.

For many reasons the theme of isolation has come up for me in the past two years. My lover of almost four years broke up with me two years ago. We had been so incredibly merged as a couple; we lived and worked together. She was my best friend and really the only close friend that I had. Not having any other close friends was partly the result of the two of us and another Lesbian moving to a city where we knew no one to intentionally isolate ourselves. Over the past two years I have also had a series of Separatist friends from other parts of the country intentionally cut off from me and other Lesbians, move to "mystery" locations and for all practical purposes drop out of my world and my community.

In the broader scheme of things, I think we as Separatist community are constantly dealing with the pulls of both isolation and community. Building community is very difficult. Sometimes we need to pull back from it; sometimes we need to pull back from a specific individual; sometimes we are too afraid to try to build community because of painful betrayals in the past. I have experienced all of these, but for the first time I truly feel like I am building a working community in Oakland, California.

Living in geographical proximity to other Separatists has changed a lot of my feelings about community. It has made me work through difficult issues in friendships. I feel like I have support for putting myself out as a Separatist in the Lesbian community because I have close Separatists friends where I live. Having a local Sep community has also changed the way I interact with the Sep community as a whole. I experienced this in a profound way in 1993 at the last Annual Lesbian Separatist Gathering, held six years in a row in Wisconsin.

I went to the 1993 Sep Gathering with different needs and expectations. It is hard to explain, but I didn't need so much from the whole

community because my needs for community are being met more locally. This freed me to be more open to making new friends and having fun with Seps that I have known for years. I guess I felt that I had more to give and was willing to give it rather than coming to the community and needing to take something away. When we live geographically close there is more chance for real friendship. With friends who live in other parts of the country I do feel friendship, but I also feel that there is potential for so much more of a deep friendship when we live near each other. The community that I have been building in Oakland has been developing since my ex-lover and I moved here in 1991. The process accelerated when two other friends moved here a year later.

So I want to talk about some ways of being isolated and some ways of being in community. I don't want to focus a lot on the time when I moved in order to be isolated. I do think that I learned from it and that it provides some background, so I will talk about it a little bit.

The basic situation was that my lover and I and a Lesbian friend of mine all moved in together and then moved to a "mystery" destination. The idea was that by being isolated we would be able to do more "radical" political actions. It was like being "underground" but not really. Actually, being isolated left us with no support to do much of anything politically. When we moved we told almost no one where we were going.

We specifically did not tell two Separatist friends we were just getting to know. That is one of my biggest regrets. Luckily we were able to reconnect with them later. I don't want to gloss over the importance of this reconnection. We made a huge mistake by lying to these Lesbians about where we were going and what we were doing. They had no idea why we dropped out of their lives. One of them later said that she thought that they were not good enough for us anymore. That wasn't the reason, but how could they know why we had disappeared? When we contacted them to explain what had happened and where we were they were very sweet and supportive. We immediately renewed the friendship.

When I moved to be isolated, the three of us were supposedly living as a "community" and did not need anyone else. This proved to be an incredibly horrible situation. My lover and I were constantly told to not be "couple-centric" by my friend. While I think it is important for all couples to be aware of the impact their relationship can have on single Dykes around them, I also think that my friend's dislike of this relationship was very Lesbian hating. The result of constant pressure to not relate as lovers was that we stopped functioning as lovers and our relationship never recovered.

The fact that we had no one to talk to about what was going on meant that there was no reality check. My friend became very verbally and psychologically abusive to me and especially to my lover. She did her best to make us feel terrible about ourselves. This went on far too long and far longer than it would have if there had been other Seps to talk with.

My lover and I learned that it was a mistake to be isolated. We were so lonely. We weren't being challenged politically or personally. We stopped appreciating each other because we spent time only with each other. It was an incredible burden to place on any relationship or friendship. The isolation affected our ability to make new and meaningful friendships. We were very dependent on each other. We did everything together and did not know how to let anyone else in. This was unrealistic and unfair.

By accident we met two Seps who lived near us. Our friendship with these Seps could not have come at a more important time. It reminded us of how wonderful it is to visit with other Seps and spend time being together. We had also been developing an important telephone and letter friendship with two Seps in Oakland. These Seps were wonderful friends. They had never met us but based on a letter my lover wrote to them they offered their friendship. Because they had written a book, we thought that they might not have time to write back to us. Instead, they were wonderful correspondents and telephone visitors. Based on one visit to them and because we knew that we wanted community, both Separatist and Lesbian, we moved to Oakland.

We had some sense of growing friendship with the two Seps in Oakland, but we didn't really have individual friendships with them. This was because of us and not because of anything that they did. Since our breakup my friends have been very supportive. Over the past year, I feel like we have developed very close friendships as individuals as well as within our larger local community. I think that this is an exception. The usual pattern seems to be that couples are friends with couples. These are often primary relationships and we do not have friendships with other Dykes as individuals. I noticed this pattern frequently with other Seps when I became single.

My lover now lives an hour away. Living far apart insures that to some extent we have separate lives, which feels good, but we don't spend as much time together as we want and I miss her. Living apart from my lover also means that I am often making plans to do things on my own.

I continue to find that couples have an easier time socializing with couples. I also find that couples almost always assume that if you make plans with one it's fine to bring the other along. I have two friends who

are a couple. I have known them since 1991 and see them frequently together. But I have only on three occasions in THREE YEARS ever seen either one of them alone. I value their friendship and they are important to me. I do think though that we could have much deeper friendships if I knew them apart from their lover relationship.

The primacy of the couple can keep us from developing meaningful friendships with each other. It can also keep Dykes in bad relationships because they are terrified of being alone. This same terror can cause Dykes to jump from one relationship to the next, and is part of the reason break-ups are so messy. Being alone is not so bad, but being isolated is a horrible feeling and they often go together for the single Dyke.

I want to write about the effects on the rest of the community when Sep friends disappear and cut off contact. I was on the side of doing this a few years ago. It was very painful and difficult. I truly feel like I made a big mistake and that there were terrible consequences. I know that if I could do it over I would never again live in isolation.

In the past two years I have been on the other side. I have had eight Separatist friends move and not tell me where they were going. Six of them cut off from me completely. These disappearances have affected me profoundly, as well as many others in our community and the Dykes who are isolating themselves.

Being cut off as a friend inevitably makes me feel bad about myself. No matter what reason I am given, I feel like there is something wrong with me. If I was a better Dyke, Sep or friend I would still be important to this Lesbian. To the extent that I have been cut off by these friends, I have felt worthless and unimportant.

We all have trouble feeling good about and loving ourselves. A friend cutting me off for no good reason only intensifies these self-hating feelings. When some Lesbians are cut off as "unworthy" and some are not because they are acceptable or approved, this only intensifies the self-hatred of the Dykes who are excluded. Cutting off completely from another Separatist should be done only as a last resort and should be reconsidered constantly as times goes on and circumstances change.

In the particular situations that I am talking about the reason these Dykes have isolated themselves is as a strategy to break free from ritual and cult abuse. This is a very different reason than the reason that I isolated myself and I want to be very clear about that. I do think however that whatever the reasons for isolation some of the same dangers exist. I also want to be clear that I know Dykes need to use different strategies

to help get free from ritual and cult abuse. Isolation is one strategy and I want to discuss the effects that it has on the rest of the community.

I have had eight friends disappear in the past two years. I saw six of them at the 1993 Sep Gathering, this was the last I saw of them. The first friend to disappear was not a close friend, but we had a connection to each other. Quite suddenly she changed everything in her life. Without any reason or warning she stopped talking to me or writing to me. She also did this to her lover and several other friends. I have repeatedly tried to contact her in the past two years. When I saw her last year, she basically pretended to not know me. It was very difficult and painful to have this connection with someone cut off without any chance to talk about it or work it through.

The second friend who disappeared had been distancing herself from me for a few months. My calls and letters went unanswered. Since she was a closer friend, I went to visit and try and find out what was going on. She too was dealing with ritual abuse memories. Her strategy also involved cutting off from friends. I felt as if we reconnected to some degree during this visit, but there was still a barrier between us. This barrier came in part from my unwillingness to agree completely with everything that she was doing and thinking about in dealing with her abuse. My criticism of isolation as a strategy was a major part of this.

Suddenly about a month after my visit she disappeared. Her lover called me in a panic not knowing where she was. I later received a call from her telling me that she was ok. She did not explain why she left so suddenly. It wasn't until much later that I received a letter explaining why she felt she had to leave her lover so suddenly. I believe their isolation as a couple and the lack of a reality check contributed to putting up with an intolerable situation. This letter did not however explain why I was being cut off as a friend. I have written to her many times and don't know if she has gotten my letters. She is simply not in my life anymore.

A third friend moved to a "mystery" destination for a year and has now returned. When she left, she told me why she felt that she needed to keep her destination a secret. And while I didn't necessarily agree with her reasons, I respected the fact that she did not isolate herself completely. She did not cut me off as a friend. I have an address where I write to her. She called me about every three weeks. I even got to see her before she moved. We are continuing to develop a friendship. This was someone that I did not know well when all of the isolation and disappearing began. Ironically, I feel that we are closer now than we ever were. I appreciate that and wonder why this was not an option with the other friends who I had known for years.

Another friend who recently disappeared wanted to remain in contact only if I would be completely uncritical of her decision to disappear.

Two others who disappeared left completely without notice. A friend sent them a letter which was returned by the post office, a pretty harsh way to learn your friends have moved on.

The remaining two sent a letter to me and others telling us they were relocating and giving an address where we could write to them. I wrote expressing my concern over the way they moved and asked who would be getting the mail at this address. I felt I had a right to know who would have access to my letters since I knew there was a good chance someone I didn't know would be getting their mail and possibly screening their letters. I received no response. A letter I got from them recently led me to believe they are now completely disappearing with no way to contact them. Their disappearance also may mean the end of the Separatist newsletter, an important connection between Separatists.

The experience that I have had with these friends has profoundly affected how I feel about community and friendships. I have also learned how hard it is to trust that friends will really be there for you when you need them. I was shaken by the breakup with my lover and the loss of that relationship. The fact that I was left without close friends was an incredible struggle. It is still hard for me to trust that my friends will be there when I need them. Losing seven friends (I am in contact with one of the eight, the one who stayed in contact when she moved), one who I considered a close friend, has affected my trust in friendship. The fact that these Lesbians have also cut off from many other Lesbians in our community affects the entire community. In some ways, I feel these disappearances have shattered my larger lesbian community.

We need each other and we need to have some sense that we can count on each other during really hard times. I want to be someone who is there for other Seps and someone who works to build community. This is always difficult. We have all had experiences of being let down and betrayed by friends. It is hard to keep starting over. We have had some hard times as a community in Oakland. But we all are at least trying our best to be real and present and true friends. For the most part I think that it has been a success story. We have grown closer in the past year and provided a lot of support for each other. Having the experience of building community here in Oakland has made it easier for me to build community at the Sep Gathering.

I also want to feel like I can count on my friends and that they will be ›re for me when I need them. If a friend disappears and cuts me off

how can I trust her again? I think that I deserve better than to be cut off with no explanation. I think that we all do. There are a lot of conflicts in our Separatist community. I have no illusions that all can be resolved and that we can function as a whole. I do have problems with the fact that some Dykes do not even bother to say why they are leaving the community or leaving a friendship. It seems as if there should be some sort of bottom line.

I don't know how to make it work, but I feel that we should all have some kind of commitment to Separatist community. I know that having Separatist community in my life everyday has helped me be a lot clearer about what I want and need from other Separatists. I don't need or expect to be friends with every Sep. But I think isolation comes too easily. I hope that my friends who have cut off from many of us do eventually want to get back into Separatist community. I would like to say that I would accept their friendship again, but I am not sure that that is possible. I do want them to be in my community. The Seps that I have had disagreements with in the past and cut myself off from, I also want to be part of my larger Separatist community. We do not all have to be friends to do community together.

My experience in helping organize a Lesbian community center, the Whiptail Lizard Lounge in San Francisco, showed me a model for community that could work in some form for Seps. The idea behind it was that in order to have a community center for all Lesbians we would all have to put up with some stuff we disagree with. The way it was supposed to work was that I was to be able to have a Separatist event at the center and have it respected. The trade off was that I would have to allow there to be other events there that I absolutely disagree with, such as a mothers support group. In practice, this did not work. A collective member left a message on my answering machine threatening a complete disruption of our Separatist event because sadomasochists were not welcome. The collective as a whole did intervene and our event was not disrupted, but it left a bad feeling. I finally gave up on the Whiptail Lizard Lounge, when it became clear that boys would be welcome. Despite the fact that WLL advertizes as lesbian only space, it in fact welcomes boys and other non-lesbians.

Despite my experiences with WLL, I do think that the idea is sound and wonder if it can work for the general Lesbian community why can't it work in some form for Separatists. We cannot accept oppressive and abusive behavior and politics, but we can do a better job of accepting Seps that we dislike or disagree with.

What we have been doing so far as a Separatist community has been successful in many ways. We had six years of the annual Lesbian Separatist Gathering. I feel so proud of us that we gathered together for six years. But I know that what we have been doing has also been a failure. There are many divisions and conflicts between us. Many Seps are officially or unofficially boycotting the annual Gathering, but none have said why. I think it is time to make some changes.

I know that we can not "put aside" our disagreements. I would not want to. I don't think that we would be Seps if we didn't feel our politics passionately. What I do want is for Seps to treat each other with equality and respect. What I do want is for us to gather as a community. What I want is an end to isolation as the first and most often used strategy for anything. Why can't we try again to function as a community. I know that I have changed a lot since the time when I cut myself off from community. I know that there have been many changes in our community. Seps have died. Seps have life threatening illnesses. Seps are struggling with impossibly difficult issues. We should not have to do this alone.

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Why Panic?*

Anne

Recently a dyke I know disappeared. Several months before she disappeared we had talked about cult ritual abuse. As a survivor I told her some of my story and she related to me that her therapist was concerned that she, I'll call her Amy, was a cult ritual abuse survivor. Amy had no memories of this form of abuse. When Amy reappeared, she told me a longer version of the following story: Before she left town, she had been having a really shitty time. She had lost her job, her mother was suicidal, and her lover had broken up with her. She had decided to temporarily terminate therapy because of lack of funds. She had a final closure session with her therapist, during which the therapist appeared worried and preoccupied. When Amy pressed the therapist on what was bothering her, the therapist told her that she was convinced that Amy was a cult ritual abuse survivor and that she thought that Amy would kill herself due to programming. Amy moved all of her stuff into storage and went to stay with some lesbians she knew in another state. These lesbians, separatists, after talking with some other separatists Amy knew, decided that Amy was a cult ritual abuse survivor. They then decided that she was under the influence of programming. What that meant to them was that what she wanted she shouldn't have and what she didn't want she should have. In other words, she was not to be trusted. When Amy attempted to argue this with them, they dismissed her objections by saying they knew they weren't talking to Amy the separatist, but to a program. This attitude resulted in behavior that stretched the continuum from silly to abusive (my language, not Amy's). For example, when they went to the video store to rent videos, Amy wanted to rent *The Bear*, a film she had seen before. On the basis of her desire to see *The Bear*, the seps decided that bears were a trigger and she should not be allowed to view the movie, and they would not rent it. They decided that she should not

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*I originally prepared and presented this article as a talk at the 1993 East Coast Lesbian Festival Separatist Pre-Fest. I am a cult ritual abuse survivor.

ever be alone. If she wanted to go outside, they said no. If she wanted to be with their horses, they said no. This went on and on. Naturally, being in this situation, Amy started to lie about what she did and didn't want which made her feel really shitty about herself. Everything came to a head when Amy, who is an incest survivor, said that she did not want to be touched. This was disregarded, and the seps kept hugging her. Amy repeated her request to please not touch her. They would not stop. She ended up physically pushing one of the women away. She then decided that she needed to leave. The seps refused to help her in any way to leave their isolated farmhouse because, again, they believed that she was simply acting on programming. This incident was the catalyst for this paper.[1] Now let me back up a bit and try to define, separate, and explain links between ritual abuse, satanic ritual abuse, and cult ritual abuse, and share some of my views about cults.

The purpose of providing these definitions is so that you will have a general sense of what I am referring to in this talk, rather than trying to create ironclad absolute characteristics and demarcations. To me the term ritual abuse appropriately refers to repeated, ritualized, psychological, sexual and/or physical abuse. There is an element of ceremony present that moves the pattern of abuse beyond that of simple habit or convenience. Ritual itself becomes part of the abuse. Not all ritual abuse is cult related. Cult ritual abuse involves a group or groups of perpetrators and victims. There is an awareness that not everybody involved is a relative. Rituals are often elaborate and obviously part of what holds the group together. The abuse combines psychological, physical, and sexual torture. Not all cults are satanic, and not all satanists are cult perpetrators or victims. In this talk when I refer to cult ritual abuse (CRA) I am including satanic ritual abuse (SRA).[2]

The most basic and more controversial view that I have about cults is this: cults are not all powerful, nor are they everywhere. Cults do cause

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[1]Note from Amy, "I really believe that the dykes I stayed with acted out of love and care and in no way intended harm."

[2]Tied up with the misperception that cults equal satanism is the belief that cults did not exist before xtianity. I disagree. Look at the 'holidays' used. I don't think that it is simply coincidence that many predate xtianity. I think cults were probably formed for the same reasons that most patriarchal institutions are formed—male usurpation of women's power. And I just don't happen to think that patriarchy would find xtianity all that terribly threatening.

serious harm and represent a real problem. They are powerful, and there are powerful people involved with them.

So what is the purpose of saying that cults are not everywhere or all powerful? The purpose is to keep a context, a context of separatist, radical lesbian, and radical feminist thought, analysis and experience. When I articulated my belief that cults aren't everywhere or all powerful to a sep recently, she disagreed with me, saying "How else do you explain fembot behavior?" How about rape, incest, sexual harassment, advertising, pornography, lack of access to jobs and education, forced hospitalization, forced motherhood—you know the list and it goes on and on. What I am saying here is let's not lose our old analysis, let's not supplant it with one overriding, cloaked, highly sensationalized phenomenon. We have an overriding, powerful, sophisticated phenomenon. It's called patriarchy and cults certainly fit into it.

I'm more interested in looking at the connections to basic patriarchal beliefs/patterns/behavior than the other way around because the other way around is misdirection. Cults are part of, not the root of patriarchy. They're sort of the logical extreme, not the cause, although obviously not completely unidirectional either. Patriarchy and cults feed off each other. Not everything is watered down cult or caused by cult. Somebody, somebodies, had to desire power over others for cults to be formed—not the other way around. In short, cults did not invent assholeness.

Why is this relevant? Like I said before, to keep a context. To understand that cult behavior is ordinary behavior carried out to an extraordinary level. Cults succeed because they are not completely out in left field. Porn, power, humiliation, s/m, ordinary kids leading ordinary lives develop groups with secret passwords and/or 'invent' private languages, etc. So do adults. Not all sororities and fraternities are cult.

The relevance for me is also partially fear based. I'm afraid that if the idea that cults are everywhere and all powerful starts commonly being tossed around, eventually dykes are going to (quite correctly) go wait a minute, I belonged to the girl scouts, a sorority, etc., and it wasn't cult and then (quite incorrectly) toss everything out. Dismiss the whole thing.

I don't want us to follow the path of calling everything X til the word becomes so stretched as to become meaningless and then those women who have experienced X are left without meaningful language/words to describe their experience and hence are erased. For example the word rape is now used in relation to objects such as corporations or concepts such as theories. Me, I think rape is a people kind of thing that is perpetuated on living beings. Another example is the way the word incest is getting distorted out of all proportion. I heard about a therapist recently who claims that if your mother had sex while pregnant it's incest. I don't want

this type of garbage to occur around ritual abuse and cult ritual abuse. Seeing how wide of a net can be spread may capture people's attention initially, but ultimately they get pissed when they suspect they've been deceived. And the ones who get hurt by all of this are the survivors.

Who are the survivors? Again I caution about throwing too wide of a net. I believe that there is a reasonable certainty in only two circumstances—either someone who was there tells the survivor what happened and she can't see why they would lie, or the survivor remembers the abuse.[3] Anything else is a guess.

Obviously there are survivors who have not remembered the abuse, but identifying those folks is a guess. Perhaps a well educated, well intentioned and even an accurate guess, but still a guess. Be very careful about presuming and then acting on the presumption that your guess accurately describes/defines another dyke's personal herstory/reality. It is not ok for well meaning friends and therapists to determine that someone is a survivor and insist that she deal with it on the basis of some symptomatology. That way of thinking is the basis for psychiatric abuse. It is some 'expert' claiming that they know your life better than you do. It is bullshit. We jump up and down when the boys do it and it does not become suddenly ok just because it is between lesbians. I'm not saying don't consider the possibility that someone is a survivor, don't explore it, and don't recommend appropriate safety precautions. I'm simply saying don't leap too far, too fast and land on some other dyke's head.

I understand wanting to help another lesbian with her pain. I understand wanting to fix things for her. I understand the frustration of feeling like you know something about her and if she would just acknowledge it and deal with it things would be so much better. But it really messes with somebody's head to say I know your life better than you do.

If you are not a survivor then you cannot truly comprehend what it is like to have lived through the abuse and what it is like to remember and hence what you are asking of her. And if you are a survivor then you should know better than to try and coerce or pressure someone into accepting a reality that 1) may be false or 2) they may not be ready to deal with. Trying to pressure, coerce, or bribe someone into remembering is cruel and not useful long term. Yeah you might get somewhere but once the coercion/bribe is removed, or she gets less desperate or stronger then

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[3]A note here about memories—very sick stuff does happen. Don't dismiss someone's memories as false just because they seem to appalling or bizarre. Also keep in mind that age, extreme emotional and physical duress, drugs and deliberate deception may factor into how an event was perceived.

it's fuck that shit. And if she really is a survivor, you've set up a beautiful reason for long term denial. Not nice. Not helpful.

This isn't like alcoholism where you can directly see what is going on and confront somebody about it. You can confront if specific behavior is bothering you, but confront on what is worrying/bugging you, not on your guesses as to its origins. Sure you can say hey, this is what I think the scoop is and explain why, but keep to the forefront of your mind that that is your opinion and the final arbiter is and should be the dyke herself. Scaring the shit out of someone, freaking them out is bullshit. For example, 'I think you are an RA survivor and will suicide because of programming.' Not ok. Freak outs don't promote useful long term change. How many of us are really fond of decisions we made in complete panic?

So what's the attraction? I think it is twofold. One, it is a power trip. Read some books, went to some workshops, talked to some people and now I know your life and can cure you of it. Whew. It probably originated as well meaning concern but it is still a power trip to define and label another lesbian's life and then insist that you know what is best for her better than she does. It's also a really great way to avoid dealing with your own shit, if you are busy taking over another dyke's life. The second attraction is a reaction to fear and panic. Someone you care about or like is in a crisis and you're afraid that she will seriously hurt or kill herself. You want to help, you want to make it better, you want to **fix it right now**. Well you can't. What you can do is listen. Help the dyke try to figure out why they are doing what they are doing and feeling what they are feeling so that there is a possibility of lasting change. Don't figure their thoughts, feelings and motivations out for them and then inform them of these plus what you determine to be their appropriate course of action. That is mean. If you do that, you've set up a dynamic where this is the agenda for what you'll listen to and what you'll accept as dealing, and a suicidal, panicked, depressed dyke might go for it the same way we reach for something we suspect or know is nasty in the long run but hey, we need something now—like someone to talk to, someone to be concerned and to hell with the consequences, we'll deal with those when we're less desperate. Taking advantage of another dyke's desperation, no matter how well intentioned we are, is not ok.

Some of you may be thinking that what I've said about not taking over for other dykes makes sense generally, but not in the case of CRA survivors or suspected survivors because of programming. I feel the same way about programming as I do cults. It is very real, it is very serious. Women screw up their lives, women hurt themselves, and women die because of programming. Yet programming is not everything. It is not all-encompassing. To treat another lesbian as if she is nothing more than a compilation of cult induced programs is inaccurate, is insulting, and is damaging.

Human beings are not computers. We are not a series of on/off switches that can be manipulated at will. If you must stick with the computer analogy, then at least think of us as beings capable of writing our own programs and of creating viruses. There is also a problem with the logic of how the programming argument gets applied. You can't have it both ways. You can't say and act as though you can't trust a lesbian or don't have to listen to what she says because everything is programmed and also claim that her being a lesbian separatist is not programmed. If you are willing to concede the possibility that cults have not been purposely and gleefully churning out lesbian separatists, then you have to admit that the dyke you are dealing with is capable of, and has been, making choices.

To insinuate, to act as though, or to presume that a lesbian has not made her own choices is to relegate her to the status of complete victim. It denies (I mean that in both senses of the word) her resistance. It erases what it means to be a survivor. This is inaccurate and insulting.

Damaging programs are internal, not external. In other words it may feel like there is a gun at your head but there isn't. Programs may lead to external action but there is choice. It may not feel like there are choices, or that the choices are strictly limited and shitty (like return to the cult or commit suicide), but generally there are more choices than the program allows for. And survivors can and do make those choices. I am not trying to deny the enormous pressure and pain that programming causes, I am denying that the element of choice is ever completely absent. To treat someone as though she has no valid or reliable capability of making choices simply because she is a survivor (or you suspect that she is a survivor) is to deny her integrity. At its base, it replicates patriarchal thinking, at its extreme it replicates cult thinking. It says to a dyke don't trust yourself, you're dangerous, we don't have to respect what you want, we know you better than you know yourself, we're the only ones who can take care of you properly, and if you fight us, it just demonstrates how confused and bad you really are.

Another way in which dykes can end up paralleling cult behavior is around the issue of 'safety'. Not surprisingly one of the issues facing survivors is personal safety. And one of the recommendations I've heard talked about and acted upon is relocating. I am not opposed to survivors relocating. If a dyke believes that she needs to get the hell out of town, then I am not going to argue against that unless I feel I have valid reasons to do so. I see no reason not to apply that same guideline with survivors. I do however have problems with some of the suggestions that Gayle Woodsum has made on how that relocation should be carried out. I get very nervous around suggestions that take control away from survivors.

Particularly when those suggestions are made within a framework that implies that non-cooperation from a survivor can be taken as indicative of the survivor's lack of health. This is always a dangerous framework, however, the more specific areas that I have a problem with are the surveillance of the survivor and the controlling of her access to the outside world.[4] This duplicates cult behavior. When I imagine myself in that situation, a situation of not being allowed to be alone, of having my mail and telephone calls screened, my instincts (and intellect) scream trap. This is not a self-destructive programmed response to an offer of assistance. It is an emotional and rational response to the notion that I am not the best judge of what I can, cannot, or simply have no desire to handle. Even when I am not the best judge, what should be done about that is a moment to moment decision that is mine to make. For somebody else to make it for me on the basis of my history of abuse is not ok.

Another problem that I have is that it pushes my buttons when dykes disappear. It particularly pushes my buttons if the dyke involved has a history, or a possible history, of cult involvement. I worry. I worry a lot. Has she disappeared or has she *been* disappeared? I am not comfortable setting up a framework where it is ok for dykes to disappear. And frankly, I'm not comfortable with anyone else setting up that framework either.

Let me stop beating around the bush. Yes, the behaviors I've described push my personal buttons, but I also think/feel that they are dangerous for our community as a whole and for survivors in particular. I understand the principle behind Gayle Woodsum's suggestions—avoiding triggers and programming, the purpose being to create safety for the survivor. But when this comes out in practice as taking over for another dyke and deciding what is best for her, it escalates the bullshit rather than decreases it.

I have been arguing that taking over for another dyke is not ok when dealing with someone who is, or who you suspect to be, a survivor, in part because this replicates patriarchal and even cult practices. And you don't undo something by replicating it. So that raises the question of what one *can* do. What I want to argue next is that there is not one appropriate way to deal with a survivor, that what is needed will differ according to your needs and hers, and these in turn will differ for each dyke.

Survivors are not all alike. Our past experiences are not all alike. Our paths towards healing and physical safety are not going to be necessarily

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[4]The basis of my information regarding Gayle Woodsum's recommendations is her handouts and the reports of lesbians that have attended her workshops. I have never spoken to Gayle Woodsum or attended any of her workshops.

alike. I think there is a certain middle class desire for 'experts' to provide authoritative advice. I think that this needs to be resisted. I think that it needs to be taken seriously that there are no experts on CRA. My being a survivor doesn't make me an expert on anything other than my own experience. Yes this makes things more confusing. Yes it would be nice to have someone tell us it is possible to make everything all right. And yes, it would be helpful to have rules to tell us how to be safe and how to tell the good dykes from the bad dykes (though I can never remember if the good dykes follow the rules or break them). Yes this might all be nice, but there is one minor problem. Reality, it has a nasty habit of intruding. And intrude it does. It reminds me constantly that the only way through this is to stumble and flail, listen to others, and figure it out for myself. What works for me may not work for somebody else and vice versa. I find therapy useful, I've got a friend who finds it pointless. I hide on halloween, I know a survivor who throws a party. You get the point.

The differences are why we need to talk (and what make the conversation interesting). They're what make it dangerous to presume we know what's going on in another dyke's head and heart.

We need to talk to each other before crises turn into disasters. One of the things that makes a crisis a crisis is discovering, rather abruptly, that you haven't a clue what to do next (which is why we like 'experts'). Simple things quickly become complex due to lack of information. In case of an emergency, do you know who your friends would want you to call and what their phone numbers are? I don't. Some dykes might want a natal family member notified, and for some dykes that might be a disaster. I had a friend who kept herself alive by occasionally checking into a psych ward. For me that is not an option to be considered. Do we know these things about each other? Do we even know enough to recognize a crisis when we see it? Some dykes act out, some dykes get quiet and withdraw. And some dykes alternate. If one dyke disappears for a few days it might just be a sign that she needs some space to clear her head and that she is taking care of herself. However it is important that someone know where she is and tell others what is going on. On the other hand, if I disappear for days, jump up and down and scream, yell, and beat the bushes til you find me, because things are not ok.

This stuff sounds easier than it is. Thinking about disasters is rarely fun. Plus we get caught up in our various notions of privacy and keeping secrets. We don't want to pry or intrude. I think that the privacy issue gets particularly reinforced in lesbians since what limited civil rights we have are premised on notions of privacy. And many of us have kept jobs

by keeping secrets. But remember that keeping secrets, keeping silence, is central to both incest and cult practices, and a major part of our resistance involves breaking silences—talking to one another about what is going on.

The community doesn't have to know everything about our lives, but keep in mind that when crises arise, people gossip. We gossip. We worry, we fuss, we process—we gossip. And by and large our gossip, particularly in an information vacuum, tends to reflect our own agendas, our own fears and hopes, more than it reflects the reality of whomever we are gossiping about. So I think that by and large you are better off with some well informed folks than letting the rumor mill take charge. Of course it is also pretty ridiculous to expect a lesbian in the middle of a crisis to produce coherent news reports for the benefit of the lesbian community. So I don't have a ready-made solution, but I do think it is a problem worth addressing.

Again I realize that I have mainly talked about 'things not to do'. That leaves fairly wide open the question of what to do, as friends, as lovers, as professional support people, as a community, with survivors. (I don't like that phraseology—sounds like what do we do with toxic waste or something but I'm not sure how to phrase it more appropriately). Anyhow, my initial response to that question is that I really don't know the answer. But (being Seps you knew there had to be a "but" to that) I don't intend to let not having 'the true and correct answer' stop me from making some up. So here it goes.

The most important premise is that it is up to survivors to figure out what is helpful/useful and what is not. Basically all the rest of you are guessing.

Now don't get me wrong. Guessing is good. If we waited til we knew everything for certain before we acted, we would never get anywhere. And to be honest, survivors are often guessing too, at least this one is, about what is helpful and what is not. And non-CRA survivors throwing their guesses into the pot is helpful in that it gives us options that we might not have thought of on our own. So don't be shy. But even if most of it is guesswork, I still think survivors' guesses ought to take precedence since we are the ones that have to deal most intimately with the consequences of acting on those guesses. And by extension, the individual survivor's guess takes precedence.

Now that I have asked you to shift away from the illusion of complete certainty, I would also like you to consider shifting away from the illusion of complete safety. What I would like to recommend instead is a shift towards considerations of minimizing damage. There are a couple of interrelated reasons that I think that this shift could be useful. For one

thing, I don't happen to believe that complete safety exists. Although it does seem to have become the holy grail of the lesbian community. I don't find the quest worthwhile. Let me try a bad analogy instead of a bad metaphor. There is a market out there for 'environmentally safe' products. The problem is that terminology reflects a marketing device more than reality. Take laundry detergent for example. Although avoiding phosphates, petroleum products and perfumes is good, you really can't argue convincingly that our lakes, oceans and ground water supply are not disturbed by millions of gallons of water tainted with coconut and vegetable oils and citric acid being dumped into them. So most responsible companies don't advertise their laundry detergent as environmentally safe. Safer maybe, but not safe. What that does is not eliminate the discussion of how a 'good' product does adversely affect the planet. And I would like to see our discussions about our physical space and our interactions be equally open to the acknowledgement that perfection is not possible. It worries me that by using safety as a guiding principle we are setting ourselves up for failure. And since accusing another of failure, or admitting failure, is painful, we resist perceiving that even when we have done our best, damage can and does occur.

Let me draw that out further. First, we do good things. Sometimes those good things have negative consequences, and we must be able to face those consequences in order to understand fully what is going on. Second, to aim for perfection means setting ourselves up for failure. And when that failure inevitably occurs, we are in danger of focusing on the failure to the exclusion of recognizing the good we have done. Further, we are in danger of turning from or on each other in our search for a scapegoat to blame the failure on. Again, what is actually going on gets trampled underfoot. Rather than focusing on a framework of perfection which the idea of true safety sets us up for, focusing on a framework of minimizing damage allows us to accept the reality that negative consequences can, and are even likely to occur. And it helps us focus on doing the best we can given the circumstances—not a bad strategy for survivors to keep in mind. It is my hope that if such a framework is accepted, we can discuss negative consequences with less of a framework of failure, frustration, and guilt.

There is one more broad recommendation I have in terms of what to do. It centers around being caring and intelligent listeners for each other. Before I describe what I mean by those terms, let me first acknowledge that such listening is easier said than done. Ok, what am I talking about? In essence a caring and intelligent listener is a listener who turns neither her heart nor her brain off while listening—not that the heart and brain

can be so easily divided. It is our hearts and minds that makes us lesbians; don't allow RA, SRA, or CRA to switch them off. Like I said, this is easier said than done. These are very difficult things to talk about, to listen to. Get over it . . . like I said, this is easier said than done.

What I mean by someone turning her heart off is difficult to describe. I am not talking so much about a general 'hardheartedness' as an inability to deal with your own emotions enough to be in a place to listen to someone else with some degree of empathy and compassion. I'm referring in part to someone who can't listen because it is too difficult for her, and so she ends up rejecting survivors. Don't think that you don't live in a world where these things go on. Sorry to break it to you, but you do. Not listening to somebody doesn't change that. I am also referring to those who can listen, but only from a very emotionally removed place. Someone who approaches it all with a curiosity protected by detachment. I'm quite familiar with that experience as I do it to myself all the time. One technique I've found helpful in stopping that is to keep in the forefront that whoever is relating these experiences made it. Not that they are happy campers necessarily, but they are here.

Of course there are dykes who need to expand their distance capabilities, who currently cannot listen without turning completely green or sobbing. This is ok once in awhile, but it tends to make for short conversations and ultimately no conversation. If you want conversation, listen to the other dyke, not just to yourself. Don't start imagining that you couldn't possibly survive such a situation. This dyke did, and she needs you to deal with her reality, not your imagined one. A trick a friend of mine recommends for overcoming this is to not visualize.

There are a number of things I think of when I say someone who doesn't turn her brain off. I think of someone who recognizes that these things happen. I think of someone who tries to educate herself about the issues. Someone who retains her perspective, who doesn't go oh my gosh and throw all of her own analysis willy-nilly out the window. I think of someone who thinks. Someone who continuously evaluates and analyzes the information she is receiving. Someone who insists that her own framework doesn't negate a survivor's reality. I also think of someone who perceives listening as an active, engaged process. Listening is a crucial element of dialogue. And when I say I want someone to talk to, dialogue is ultimately what I am after.

So, in conclusion, why panic? Well, because this is frightening stuff, and we worry and we want to help lesbians we care about. So far, so good. But why panic when panic takes our concern and twists us right back into patriarchal beliefs and methods.

Re-Patterning, Ritual Abuse, and s/m as an Access Issue*

Debby Earthdaughter

I want to talk about how we as a lesbian community work with really charged stuff. I'm a survivor of satanic ritual abuse. When I'm around people wearing or using things like whips, body piercings, and chains, I get triggered into flashbacks of my ritual abuse and into ritual programming. The ritual programming tells me there is no way out except to kill myself. It takes a lot of energy to deal with all the suicidal feelings then.

There is stuff that is neutral, but part of my abuse—certain colors, crochet hooks, needles. These I expect to be part of the world I inhabit or create. I defuse the charge on these things over time by telling myself —that's just a crochet hook. It's used for creating beautiful needlework. Other things like whips and swastikas and such, I want only in our memories/museums of how *not* to live. I don't think of them becoming neutral because they are things with a whole history and shared group meanings about oppression.

When women are wearing stuff that was used to abuse me, I sometimes feel like screaming: How can you *play* with this?. This is the stuff of my real past. Would you like in reality to have your baby killed? Like to be forced to kill animals? Be forced to eat the flesh of killed babies, including your own? Be forced to make the choice between who is hurt—your own mother or another woman?

When I see nipple rings that's what I see. I am 4 or 5. A man in a robe holds a knife to my mother's throat. Another woman is there. Her nipple has a ring in it with a chain attached. The man puts the chain in my hands. Either I can pull on the chain, or he will cut my mother's throat. Which do I want? I choose to hurt the woman. I still hear her

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*Thanks to Catherine Odette of *Dykes, Disability & Stuff* who I first heard talk about s/m as an access issue. And to zana for her thinking about re-patterning.

screams, see her blood. This was an effective way to brainwash a kid into thinking she was mean. Look what I had done to this woman. These illusions of choice were a big part of my indoctrination. It was to make me feel that I was just like them. And that only they would understand and accept me.

Nipple and labia piercings were common for adult women in this cult. It was part of chaining us up and chanting "slaves of satan, slaves of satan." This cult was clever about leaving as little physical evidence on kids as possible. So us kids were chained using shackles or dog collars. The "slaves of satan" stuff was to let us know we were always chained to them. There was no escape except through death. There were satanists everywhere and they would know us and just bring us back.

That's part of what's hard about seeing s/m stuff at lesbian places—it triggers that "it's everywhere." I'm not saying these dykes are satanic cult members. It's that seeing the stuff used in the cult triggers the programming. It's also hard that s/m stuff is getting to be part of chic fashion. s/m stuff becomes part of being an outsider, a rebel, an outlaw. It's used to say "fuck you" to the patriarchy.

Rebellion and Change

My mother called herself "the female James Dean," rebel without a cause. I saw her self-destruct and hurt me in the process. And it also had its appeal. I blocked out the ritual abuse, but the drinking and gambling were like we weren't an uptight family. Not moralistic and law and order like so many.

The biker stuff never had much appeal to my rebel side though. The leader of our cult sold/lent me to a biker group to use. They weren't strangers—we had some shared cult ritual with them. I remember being a teenager. I'm naked. I'm in a field out by the shale quarries. I'm drugged. They ride around and around me on bikes. Some carry chains. They narrow in closer and closer and trap me with the chains. Dust flying. Exhaust. Can still taste the smell of leather. Many men raping me.

So black leather has had no appeal. The brand of toughness I opted for was jeans, work or hiking boots. Aviator mirrored sunglasses. Carrying a knife and fighting as a kid. Very physically strong. Outdoor work. And good at science. Able to do man's work in the forest or science lab. No feelings.

This was a rebellion against being a feminine victim. I was different from what a girl was supposed to be. Another rejection of my family was

putting energy toward political change. I challenged my family's racism. Nature gave me a lot of strength, so I learned about it even if it was just starlings eating out of our apartment's garbage dumpster. I learned about animal rights, environmentalism, and more self-sufficient, sustainable living. My mother's father was a salesman and toadied to rich people. I felt pride in my father doing real work—blue collar work.

My strong desire to make something different was a way I could deal with the abuse without dealing with it directly. I blocked what was happening to me. But if I was part of making a better world, where people weren't victims to any oppressions, then there wouldn't be abuse either.

I lived out a mixture of self-destructive rebellion and positive work for change. I've seen the same mix in many other political women; both are ways that are different from fitting into our assigned roles.

Reading Starhawk's *Truth or Dare* made me think more about what rebellion does:

> When the system defines our choices, it channels rebellion into modes that it is prepared to control, into acts that harm the rebel, not the system.[1]

My mother's rebel without a cause stuff didn't change things. It just hurt her, while maybe giving her a false feeling of freedom.

Satanism/Christianity and Rebellion

My family's satanic cult twisted things from christianity. I see satanism and christianity as two sides of the same coin. Rulers forced european pagans to adopt christianity. Paganism was a very integrated way of life. Christianity separated spirituality from the earth. Sexual pleasure became "sinful," and raising ritual power forbidden. So christian leaders created satanism as a convenient channel for rebellion. Satanism takes christianity's individual separated from nature and wreaks havoc. It's "anything goes" to arouse sexual feelings or ritual energy. And this energy is not for integrating better with nature—it's used to further individuals' power over others.

Christianity and satanism play into each other. When you are satanically abused like I was, then the church may be an appealing haven. I was a christian for a few years when I was a teenager. I left because I felt it was too limited, too "one-way." And there was no real place for the deep connection I felt with nature. Or for my sexuality. It would have been more difficult to leave if I didn't have other options in my life—like being good at school and looking like I'd get an out by getting a college scholarship. I also wonder if survivors of satanic abuse stay

with christianity too when christians are the only ones talking against satanism as a real thing. It will help to have more information from pagan feminist perspectives. We need to say satan isn't real, but satanic ritual abuse *is*. And that we are developing ways to deal with it.

For women abused by strict christian families, "anything goes" may be appealing. I had a lover who grew up in a pentecostal holiness family with father and grandfather as preachers. For my lover, any spirituality was contaminated. My lover lived the outlaw rebel stuff too as a drug dealer. We broke up when I moved away and got sober.

When I do life-affirming ritual as a witch, I'm not conforming *or* being a rebel. I'm living the thing that is outside patriarchy, that fills the empty space patriarchy leaves. When I was drinking, being an "outsider," I was spending energy saying, I'm not your patriarchal woman. But I was doing it in a way that just used me up. Rebellion seems still so tied into the system that we're rebelling against. The real alternative to me is to stop trying to shock or prove my difference. It's to put energy into building an interdependent earth-based way of living.

s/m???

I try to understand why s/m appeals to women. If someone is doing something, it must serve some purpose. Maybe our communities can build other ways to serve those purposes. I don't want to contribute to just condemning women for doing s/m.

I know that many women participating in s/m are survivors of sexual abuse and some of ritual abuse too. It may be a powerful feeling to reenact things and have some control over what was once forced. To be able to call out and have it stop.

In some ways I understand too how it may be a tool to bring out memories. Many women who were severely abused develop multiple personalities. I didn't. I started getting memories not long after I got sober from alcohol and sugar. I have a lot of access to my feelings and memories. That's very hard. But in many ways I feel more fortunate than women who are struggling with only fragments of memory or no memories at all.

I can understand not wanting to be ashamed of your sexuality. Our abuse and general patriarchal culture give us these images of sex and violence linked together. Yet it says that if we are turned on by sex-violence, then we are perverse.

I've heard too that some women can't feel any sexual pleasure without violence. I've heard some stories of women healing around this, finding that they can feel sexual over time. More stories like this would help.

I can understand wanting the shock value too. Wanting to play out some street theater and shake people out of their complacency. SEE SEE SEE . . . See what things are REALLY like. This is the undercurrent to all the nice stuff on the surface. Wanting to break through the facade of everything's OK. Especially how it is played out in our abusive families. Perpetrators can be "upstanding citizens." And if their kids are having any problems, they're made to just look crazy or fucked-up. Instead of the reality that their distress comes from abuse.

But I don't need shaking up. I'm already dealing with my own ritual abuse. And I'm dealing with how fucked up our patriarchal society is in general.

I'd like to create something different. And I don't mean a new age kind of just think positive, it'll be alright. I mean facing, continuing to deal with the hard, awful stuff. But not living in it anymore than I have to.

Consent

s/m women have talked a lot about how important consent is. I agree. I'd like to have choices about being around the really charged stuff. I'd like to not be around it without consenting to it. When someone wears really charged stuff, it does affect others. It makes them part of the dynamic whether that's what they wanted or not. The woman who decides to wear a whip or nazi-style gear makes a choice—she consents to being with whatever feelings that evokes for her. For making that the priority. Unless she talked to all the women who were going to be at the event she wears it to, they didn't consent. They didn't have a choice.

Saying I want choices doesn't mean just avoiding all charged stuff. I deal with it so I can clear it. For me that's mostly through art and co-counseling. If I feel blocked, often new memories will come out if I make more quiet time. If not, talking to other survivors or reading other accounts of ritual abuse always brings out new stuff for me.

I guess I could read s/m stuff for that purpose too, but I don't. Because it's important to me to feel like I can say that was the past. I still have to deal with it, but I'm breaking the cycle now. Reading or acting out s/m fantasies would feel like I'm deepening the associations from my abuse.

I don't want to expose others to really charged stuff without their consent either. I've been in art shows of incest survivors. They are very hard to see. But you know what to expect when you walk in. I wouldn't want to show my art about abuse in a way that women would just walk into it without knowing. I'm fortunate to have a co-counselor who can deal with my ritual abuse stuff. In co-counseling they say to only counsel on what your co-counselor can handle. So I wouldn't just start counseling on this with a new counselor or in front of a class without checking it out first.

Re-Patterning

I want to create new patterns in myself. zana and I have started using the term "re-patterning" as a shorthand for this work. This is what it means to me: The patriarchy thrives on fear, fear that comes from the *power-over*[2] dynamic of domination and submission. Power-over operates in every interaction in the patriarchy. It may be an overt act of violence. It may be ignoring the pain one causes another. It may be the structural violence of poverty, racism, etc., that controls who gets what. My work is to change how I am in the world, to get away from playing out the assigned roles as dominant or submissive.

By doing that, I'm cultivating my *power-from-within*, my ability to let energy flow through me and do my work. This isn't the power of threats, or holding control. It's the power of a plant growing up through the soil, unfolding its contribution to life on the planet.

And in working with others, I develop my *power-with*, the power to change and be changed by others. We build an energy web together. We are able to do far more together than if we were all working alone.

I choose to be conscious about my sexuality—to develop a chosen sexuality consistent with my beliefs. I have images of violence in my head, from my own abuse and from all the stuff society puts out. I have not felt drawn to act out these. I was with a lover once who wanted to. This was before I had incest memories. I agreed to try it, and it felt dead to me. I wanted sex to be a way to really be loving my lover, not acting out a role.

When images of violence come up for me now, I recognize them as my old conditioning coming out. I acknowledge them and say goodbye to them. Then I think of images that I like and find exciting—making love outdoors, the sensual feeling I get while gardening, how I get turned on by the ocean.

I don't feel bad for having images of violence in my head. They come from my abuse and I won't be ashamed of them. I won't repress them, pretend they're not there. But I will make choices about what I want to feed in my thinking and what I want to release for the earth to take and transform.

Reading Audre Lorde on the erotic helped me think a lot. Having my erotic energy flow doesn't mean sensation or orgasm at any cost; the sex-violence, the pornographic, is deadening.

> Pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.[3]

Despite all the talk of sexual liberation, practicing the sex-violence of patriarchal culture actually *blocks* energy. Energy flows from living a sexuality consistent with the relations we are building in all the other areas of our lives:

> In order to make integrated life choices, we must open the sluice gates in our lives, create emotional consistency. This is not to say that we act the *same* way, or do not change and grow, but that there is an underlying integrity that asserts itself in all of our actions.[4]

The more I free myself of the sex-violence connections I got from patriarchal society, the more my deepest erotic energy flows and enlivens all my life, nothing separated off.

I give my energy out to the other beings of the earth and receive their energy flowing to me. This is the spiritual, political, emotional, erotic reunited after all the divisions of patriarchy.

And this can't be some privileged individual solution. I'm troubled by recovery stuff that doesn't deal with the larger political picture. Really changing means creating different ways to live that create more equal relations. If I don't continually work on my classism, racism, ageism, etc., then it's just keeping a different form of devaluing people. To me satanic ritual abuse isn't an isolated thing. It's part of a system of thinking where power-over is the operating force.

My work is to build a way of being that sees everything in relation. And be conscious of how my actions affect others and theirs mine. All my messed up thinking won't change overnight, but I'm committed to the process.

Spaces, Intents, and Access

I want to make places to connect with other women who share re-patterning work. So we can build together.

And I want s/m dykes to have spaces to be together where they can feel unrestricted.

And I want better ways of dealing with when we come together for our mutual benefit. I don't live in such a privileged world that I can just be in spaces that are all re-patterning women. So I want some way of acknowledging different ways of working with charged stuff. And being clear about what our intents are when creating events and spaces.

It is hard to do my work when I'm being triggered into flashbacks. Then s/m stuff becomes an access issue for me as a survivor of satanic

ritual abuse. I've also heard other women talk about being offended by s/m stuff, maybe not being able to function in a space with it, for different reasons. Some Jewish women and women of color consider using images of their oppression to be anti-semitic and racist. I have working class friends who talk about it as maintaining power differences so keeping classism fueled. I've heard feminists talk about s/m as harmful to women as an oppressed group in patriarchal society. By eroticizing power-over, we keep power-over in place. That helps keep all oppressions going.

How to work with the difficult coming together places? In my experience, some s/m women take it as an attack if someone says something about being negatively affected by what she's doing. So she says she's victimized, oppressed. But does not liking what someone does mean you are oppressing them? My idea of feminist or lesbian community isn't unconditional acceptance of anything anybody does. I want to respect other women around me. I want to understand the complexity of why we do the different things we do. But that doesn't mean anything goes to me. Is it oppressing someone to challenge the racist things they are saying? To not want to breathe their cigarette smoke?

If something I do harms someone else, and they let me know that, then I'm going to feel bad. But that doesn't equate to them oppressing me. I'm european heritage. In this society, it's really up to me how much I'm willing to unlearn racism. If I opt to not put much energy to doing this, then yes, I will get some people not liking me. But overall, I'm supporting the status quo, so the status quo is supporting me.

It seems similar around other isms where I'm on the receiving end. If someone doesn't care much about environmental access and does stuff that makes me sick, I can talk about it. But while this may make the woman feel bad, the majority culture supports her. She can go many places and smoke, wear any fragrance, release almost anything into the air. There's not many places I can be and have people not putting almost anything into the air. So that seems a real reversal if the one who has the option of doing the thing and harming the other is the one who cries oppression. Really they are just being asked to start considering the effects of their behavior on others.

I see s/m activities and paraphernalia many places outside the lesbian world. Obviously it was part of my cult abuse. s/m paraphernalia have origins in the Holocaust and slavery and currently in power-over situations such as police gear and neo-nazi wear. Dominance/submission is common in pornography, mainstream or gay or lesbian. It's the way patriarchy runs overall.

So what's hard to find is space where there's a conscious effort to try something different. It may be from different intents—to have spaces where women who survived satanic abuse can be without being as triggered into ritual programming. It may be to have spaces without symbolism of nazi times so Jewish women aren't getting as much anti-semitism. And it may just be to have spaces with the intent of trying on something different from domination and submission. The last one may be a desire out of privilege—to have the kind of space to make choices about how you live, to have the energy to make new culture. But the other reasons are not out of privilege. When the symbols and language that s/m uses are the ones used to oppress me or another, then speaking about their effects is hardly an act of privilege—of oppressing an s/m dyke. In the power-over world, what she's doing has the power of the status quo. I am one of the ones stretching for a place to survive. To survive despite a culture in synch with satanic abuse, a culture that plays with torture. A culture that would like us to torture each other. It saves so much energy if we do it to ourselves.

Are we ready to make spaces that are for living?

Endnotes

[1]Starhawk. *Truth or Dare* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 83.

[2]*Power-over, power-from-within, power-with* are terms from *Truth or Dare,* 8-10.

[3]Audre Lorde. Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power. In, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984) 54.

[4]Audre Lorde and Susan Leigh Star. Interview with Audre Lorde. In, *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis,* Robin Ruth Linden, Darlene R. Pagano, Diana E. H. Russell, and Susan Leigh Star, Eds. (San Francisco: Frog in the Well, 1982), 68.

Conceptualizing Images of Multiple Selves in the Poetry of Audre Lorde

Elaine Shelly

A Question of Audre

How do I begin to speak your name? You taught me that there is no honesty in talk about death, especially when it includes women. And I know that words dripping with the cheeriest of roses would make you cringe and wonder when the thorns would appear. So I will stick with what you have taught me.

Your silence will not protect you.[1]

It is your thick, determined silence that resounds in my head now. I understand why you spent so much time speaking of it. You knew better than most of us that silence is inevitable. And who can protect you now? Who will shield your silence from those who care to pick through your ashes to find another you; from those who will only feel safe by proving your death a failure, a punishment meaning you are to be forgotten—just another dead poet, just another?

Berlin is Hard on Colored Girls[2]

You shared a secret once that colored girls could have nightmares of Selma and Berlin. (Geography is of little importance to those marked for death.) So in the spirit of Sojourner at Selma and Berlin, you gently lifted your blouse showing the one breast to prove your lineage and right to scream.

Your silence has substance because of the question left dangling. That question has a beat that glides, slithers, dances among the hush. It pounds, throbs, presses, but never too quickly. Never more quickly than a heartbeat. Never more forcefully than anything beyond living. Never more insistent than the demand of your next breath. An unanswered question.

Is Your Hair Still Political?
tell me
when it starts to burn . . .[3]

Audre, it's burning.

Elaine Shelly, December 1992

I am Elaine Shelly. I am a black woman. I am lesbian. I am chronically ill. I am disabled. I am a poet. I am an independent scholar. I am a teacher. I am many. I am one. It was my personal journey to discovering the many parts of myself that has led me to looking closely at the poetry of Audre Lorde. It was through her poetry that I learned both the power and danger of claiming poet as an identity.

> I cannot recall the words of my first poem
> but I remember a promise
> I made my pen
> never to leave it
> lying
> in somebody else's blood.[4]

Like Audre, I also cannot remember the first poem I wrote, but one of those early poems written after my teenage years was composed while I lived in Jamaica on a research fellowship. It was a wonderful experience, living in a country where everyone looked like me or one of my relatives. I laughed aloud the day a tour bus passed me while I was walking to the Jamaica School of Music. A sea of white faces peered from the windows as if they were witnessing for the first time a true Jamaican woman. Yet, I found myself crying and writing a poem about my feelings of homeless, of being a woman without a country. At this time, I did not know the name Audre Lorde, but a few years later when I found her words, Audre affirmed this feeling of disconnection in "School Note."

> My children play with skulls
> and remember
> for the embattled
> there is no place
> that cannot be home
> nor is.[5]

Audre Lorde's poetry informed me that I was not the only woman struggling with claiming multiple identities and resisting demands from those representing individual parts of myself that I choose allegiance to only one part and leave the others behind. Anything less, according to them, was betrayal and threatened the erasure of all of myselves. Since I would not or could not choose a single identity, I could not have any self. I simply ceased to exist. But Audre was there for me reminding me that the demand for allegiance was made in fear, not in love.

who do you think me to be
that you are terrified of becoming
or what do you see in my face
you have not already discarded
in your own mirror
what face do you see in my eyes
that you will someday
come to
acknowledge your own?[6]

Audre reminded me that I was simply a sister outsider. And she continues to remind me as I claim more identities that place me at the margins. As I have become acquainted with myself who has multiple sclerosis and is disabled, the tug for allegiance has grown even stronger, but the impossibility of choosing a single identity has also grown more graphic. I can no more leave behind the fact that I am of African descent than I can leave behind the fact that I am woman any more than I can leave behind the fact that I use a wheelchair. And again, Audre reminds me that my feelings that I have been marginalized beyond the point of having a community are feelings of internalized oppression. She reminds me again that I am simply a sister outsider.

Now you have made loneliness
holy and useful
and no longer needed
now
your light shines very brightly
but I want you
to know
your darkness also
rich
and beyond fear.[7]

In this paper, I intend to talk about the idea of owning multiple selves or claiming several identities. Audre Lorde's poetry presents vivid examples of this because she was very consistent in announcing and writing about her identities. Although I never met Audre Lorde and only know her speaking voice through a taped poetry reading I possess, those who were close to her say that at each reading, she would announce, "I am a black woman, lesbian, warrior poet, mother." For those of us who missed hearing those words we can find them in an essay. "Perhaps for some of you here today I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am

woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself—a Black woman warrior poet doing my work—come to ask you, are you doing yours?"[8] In a 1978 interview Audre Lorde reveals another reason why her poetry, in particular, provides distinct examples for examining multiple identities when she says, "Poetry is an art, like any other art, and has a function. The function is to make each one of us more who we are—to empower us."[9] So in looking at Audre's poetry, we also have the opportunity to look at Audre, who remained constant to her identities, even in the last poem she wrote seven months before she died of cancer in November 1992.

But how do I as a researcher look at her work without as I stated in my opening poem, 'picking through her ashes?' It is difficult for me to discuss the work of a woman who is unable to speak for herself. How do I weed through my own passion for Audre and avoid creating selves that she did not claim? As a woman with a disability and chronic illness, I would like to say Audre Lorde also claimed these identities in her poetry. She mentions Amazons several times in poems, referring to warrior women who would cut off their right breasts to facilitate use of a bow. It would be understandable that a woman who had a mastectomy and refused to wear a prosthetic breast would use this image in her poetry, but her identification with Amazons began when she was a high school student studying the Amazons of Greek mythology, long before she developed breast cancer and long before she even knew of the Amazons of Africa.[10] And although she was born nearly blind, her poetry is filled with references to blindness—used to mean the inability or unwillingness to comprehend or a source of shame—a context that does not show sensitivity to those who are blind.

> The cockroach
> who is dying
> and the woman
> who is blind
> agree
> not to notice
> each other's shame[11]

In my research, I have found a tendency for many writers to highlight only one aspect of her identity, usually her ethnicity or sexual orientation. And I understand the need for focus that makes research and study manageable, but leaving Audre Lorde's work with only examinations

of an isolated self also leaves an incomplete reading of her work. For example, if Audre Lorde is only a black poet, it is easy to understand a portion of her poem "Afterimages."

> I inherited Jackson, Mississippi.
> For my majority it gave me Emmett Till
> his 14 years puffed out like bruises
> on plump boy-cheeks
> his only Mississippi summer
> whistling a 21-gun salute to Dixie
> as a white girl passed him in the street
> and he was baptized my son forever
> in the midnight waters of the Pearl.[12]

But if Audre Lorde is only a genderless black poet, where do we place lines from the same poem where her woman self acknowledges the limitations of power even for the white woman responsible for Emmett Till's death?

> a woman surveying her crumpled future
> as a white girl besmirched by Emmett's whistle
> never allowed her own tongue
> without power or conclusion
> she stands adrift in the ruins of her honor
> and a man with an executioner's face pulls her away.[13]

And if Audre is only a lesbian poet, we would come to expect a poem such as "Martha," her first poem acknowledging love for another woman. It was written in 1968 and tells of her love and anguish for a woman severely injured in a car accident.

> . . . yes Martha
> we have loved each other and yes I hope
> we still can
> no Martha I do not know if we shall ever
> sleep in each other's arms again.[14]

But Audre's lesbian identity is not synonymous with her identity as mother. Neither does Audre's identity as woman explain her writing of being pregnant and her interpretation of mothering.

How the days went
while you were blooming within me
I remember each upon each
the swelling changed planes of my body

how you first fluttered then jumped
and I thought it was my heart.[15]

And none of these selves explain the warrior poet part. What does Audre mean when she says she is a warrior poet? In a 1980 interview, she said, "If we just once dealt with how much we hate most of what we do, there would be no holding us back from changing it. This is true with any kind of movement. This is the way in which the philosopher/Queen, the poet-warrior leads."[16] So using Audre's self-definition, her warrior poet self can be found in overt statements about her warrior self and warrior sisters, especially in poems from *The Black Unicorn*. Or the warrior poet can be found in poems where the word "warrior" is never mentioned.

Some women wait for something
to change and nothing
does change
so they change
themselves.[17]

So now that I have acknowledged the many ways in which Audre Lorde identified herself, I am faced with another dilemma. Alice Walker said that, "no person is your friend who demands your silence."[18] So the simple question is how do I delve into Audre's work and remain her friend? The more complex issue is how to talk about the work of women who eschew conventional Western thought about mental and emotional health being contingent upon the existence of a self as being one integrated unit—those who ignore the concept of multiple selves as being inherently fragmented and pathological. The answer to these questions to me is in accepting the fact that Audre, as many women who chose to name themselves, has many identities that are integrated, yet can be conflicting. In the same 1980 interview I quoted from earlier, Audre says, "Being outside the pale is one way of keeping myself honest. It's very necessary. There are no dichotomies that anyone can force upon you unless you have internalized them yourself."[19]

The critical examinations of Audre Lorde's work are both interesting and troubling for me. As I stated earlier, most studies that delve into identity issues only consider one aspect of Audre's identity and leave the

others silent, some even justifying the omissions and silences not for the sake of clarity or brevity, but for their unimportance. One study of Audre Lorde's work claims that her poetry is focused on absorbing her father's power in order to obtain social change.[20] Putting aside the homophobic misassumption that Audre craved a phallocentric source of power, this notion totally ignores her other selves and silences her warrior woman identity, the self that, to Audre, acted as a catalyst for change.

And while critical theory may offer explanations of the literature produced by some writers such as Clarence Major, who believes that great poetry hides behind the fictional I or a constructed poetic self, I question the use of critical theory in looking at the work of Audre Lorde. With the exception of "Need: A Chorale for Black Woman Voices," a poem written in response to the murders of 12 black women in the Boston area in 1979, Audre Lorde does not use the fictional I in her poetry.[21] Hence, her poetry is not simply about language, but about herselves. She reveals and explains herselves through and with her poetry. Audre Lorde, just as Toni Morrison and many other black women writers, uses an African ideology as the framework for her writing—that art has a purpose beyond its creation. And for Audre, in particular, poetry was not just about clever manipulation of language, but a means of survival for her many self-defined identities. Audre explains herself and her intentions in several poems throughout her writing life.

> I am
> a dark temple where your true spirit rises
> beautiful
> and tough as chestnut[22]

> I am Black
> because I come from the earth's inside
> take my word for jewel
> in the open light[23]

> I am writing these words as a route map
> as artifact for survival[24]

> I am a woman whether or not
> you are against me[25]

> I am not afraid to say
> unembellished
> I am dying
> but I do not want to do it
> looking the other way.[26]

Since Audre was so generous in supplying us with this self-revelation—*I am. I am. I am.*—why is it necessary to use a methodology that looks for the meaning behind the meaning? Why is it necessary to deconstruct Audre Lorde's selves? By using the words of some French feminists and critical theorists, some researchers have, hopefully unintentionally, taken a paternal stance in their work that infers that they know Audre better than Audre knew herself.

And I am further disturbed by critical work that questions Audre Lorde's emphasis on difference and accuses her of exoticizing herself. One writer uses Adrienne Rich's introduction to *The Black Unicorn* as an example.

> Her rhythms and accents have a timelessness of a poetry which extends beyond white Western politics, beyond the anger and wisdom of Black America, beyond the North American earth, to Abomey and Dahomeyan Amazons.[27]

And in reading this introduction, I might agree that there is an element of exoticism in the statement that Audre Lorde's poetic understanding was beyond one of the selves she claimed—her black self. But I also realize these are not Audre Lorde's words. And she never claimed this rarefied knowledge in her interviews, prose or poetry. In her poem, "A Woman Speaks," Audre Lorde does claim an ancient knowledge, but it is not a knowledge available only to Audre Lorde, but a knowledge that comes in recognizing the heritage of her black woman self.

> I have been a woman
> for a long time
> beware my smile
> I am treacherous with old magic
> and the noon's new fury
> with all your wide futures
> promised
> I am
> woman
> and not white.[28]

Many women of color understand the differences between exoticism and self-definition. Regardless of our life's work, we are reminded daily of our difference by either media portrayals or individuals or institutions representative of mainstream culture that is all too willing to tell us over and over that we are too dark, too fat, too lesbian too, ethnic, too different. In the face of that understanding of our culture, we can read with the knowledge there is nothing exotic intended in the lines from her

poem, "To the Poet Who Happens to be Black and The Black Poet Who Happens to Be a Woman."

> but I can recall without counting
> eyes
> cancelling me out
> like an unpleasant appointment
> postage due
> stamped in yellow red purple
> any color
> except Black and choice
> and woman
> alive.[29]

Audre Lorde's first poem was published in 1949, but her work grew out of the Black Arts Movement that came to fruition over a decade later. Because of the style in which she chose to write, because of the male dominance and homophobia of the Harlem Writers Guild where Audre Lorde sought support for her early work, because one prominent black critic dubbed her first publication "quiet and introspective,"[30] and, I speculate, because of her unyielding allegiance to her multiple identities, Audre acquired the reputation of being the quiet voice of the Black Arts Movement. But it seems a paradox that a poet who calls herself a warrior poet be a quiet voice. It seems a paradox to label Audre Lorde a quiet voice, when one realizes that she spent her writing life railing against silence. The quiet voice reputation faded. *Ms. Magazine* was one of the first magazines to regularly review her work beginning in 1970, *Essence Magazine*, a slick magazine for black women, didn't review Audre Lorde's work until 1983.[31] And between *Ms.* and *Essence*, other small women's magazines and journals also carried reviews of her work. But the omissions and attempts to silence Audre's uncomfortable and sometimes conflicting identities began early in her writing career and will continue, I suppose, now that she is dead. But in return for the affirmations Audre Lorde provided for me as a sister outsider and as a part of my responsibility for claiming the identity as poet, I feel an obligation not to speak for Audre, but to allow Audre to speak for herself—black woman, lesbian, warrior poet, mother. And in speaking for herself in an interview published in the *American Poetry Review* she says, "I can't depend on the world to name me kindly, because it never will. If the world defines you, it will define you to your disadvantage. So either I'm going to be defined by myself or not at all."[32]

Endnotes

[1]The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action. *Sister Outsider* (California: Crossing Press, 1984) 41.

[2]Berlin is Hard On Colored Girls. *Our Dead Behind Us* (New York: Norton, 1986) 22-23.

[3]A Question of *Essence*. *Our Dead Behind Us*, 62.

[4]To the Poet Who Happens to Be Black and the Black Poet Who Happens to Be a Woman. *Our Dead Behind Us*, 7.

[5]School Note. *The Black Unicorn* (New York: Norton, 1978) 55.

[6]Outside. *The Black Unicorn*, 61.

[7]Sister Outsider. *The Black Unicorn*, 106.

[8]The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action, 41.

[9]Karla Hammond. Audre Lorde: Interview, *Denver Quarterly* 16:1 (1981) 11.

[10]"In high school when we talked of Greek mythology . . . we saw ourselves as Amazons, woman warriors." Karla Hammond. An Interview with Audre Lorde. *The American Poetry Review* 9:2 (1980) 20.

[11]Kitchen Linoleum. *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance* (New York: Norton, 1993) 36.

[12]Afterimages. *Undersong: Chosen Poems, Old and New* (New York: Norton, 1992) 187-88.

[13]Afterimages. *Undersong: Chosen Poems, Old and New*, 189.

[14]Martha, *Undersong: Chosen Poems, Old and New*, 64.

[15]Now That I am Forever with Child. *Undersong: Chosen Poems, Old and New*, 26.

[16]Karla Hammond. An Interview with Audre Lorde, 19.

[17]Stations. *Our Dead Behind Us*, 15.

[18]Alice Walker. A Talk: Convocation 1972. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) 36.

[19]Karla Hammond. An Interview with Audre Lorde, 21.

[20]"The poetry is, then, a prolonged spiritual effort to reach the father, to be transformed into him, and to be his likeness, more son than daughter . . . Lorde's quest is not for power for its own sake. Nor is it self-serving quest, but a search for power at the service of a tremendous social anger." Jerome Brooks. In the Name of the Father: The Poetry of Audre Lorde. *Black Women Writers*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 270-71.

[21]"No, I don't agree with Clarence. But I think that it's a good cover (laughs)." Karla Hammond. An Interview with Audre Lorde, 21.

[22]Audre Lorde Rollins. Black Mother Woman. *From a Land Where Other People Live* (Detroit: Broadside, 1973) 16.

[23]Coal. *Undersong: Chosen Poems, Old and New*, 22.

[24]On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge. *Our Dead Behind Us*, 55.

[25]Dahomey. *The Black Unicorn*, 11.

[26]Today Is Not the Day. *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance*, 57.

[27]"Rich's rhetoric, despite (or rather because of) its own best intentions, colludes with the exoticism marketed by the cover illustration. . . . If Lorde is to be admitted to the American reading public, she is, ironically enough, admitted as a representation of Otherness." Sagri Dhairyam, Artifacts for Survival: Remapping the Contours of Poetry with Audre Lorde. *Feminist Studies* 18:2 (1992) 230.

[28]A Woman Speaks. *The Black Unicorn*, 5.

[29]To the Poet Who Happens to Be Black and the Black Poet Who Happens to Be a Woman. *Our Dead Behind Us*, 6-7.

[30]Irma McClaurin-Allen. Audre Lorde. *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 41: Afro-American Poets Since 1955*, eds. Trudier Harris and Thadious M. Davis (Detroit: Bruccoli Clark, 1985) 219.

[31]Margaret Homans. Audre Lorde. *African American Writers*, eds. Valerie Smith, Lea Buechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: Charles Scribner, 1991) 277.

[32]Karla Hammond. An Interview with Audre Lorde, 19.

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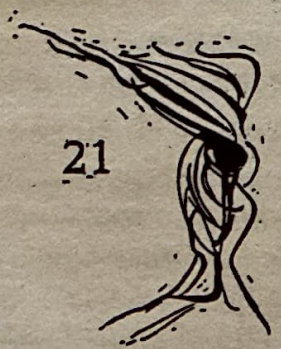

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Racism (Culturism) in Feminist Spirituality*

Senganata Münst

In order to establish a point of departure, I would like to begin by briefly defining and clarifying the concepts of "spirituality" and "racism" (culturism).

The concept of "spirituality" itself carries with it the belief that spirit exists *(spiritus* [latin]: breath, soul, aspiration). In this article I will use "feminist spirituality" to refer to the concrete ideas and images in feminist publications that take the concept "spirit" as their basis, and the forms of expression connected to them.

A universally valid feminist lesbian definition of soul or spirit does not exist. Within various feminist lesbian networks and belief systems, however, the wide spread use of certain methods and practices make the content of the concepts "soul" and "spirit" clear. Many feminist lesbian and heterosexual women have rediscovered, worked to acquire, and reinterpreted areas of knowledge and methods, such as the study of myths, the study of religious history, trance, and Tarot.

The study of European myths has returned to consciousness a belief in the existence of goddesses. Rediscovered goddesses, such as Gaia, Artemis, Europa, Hecate, etc., are not to be considered objects of worship. The qualities of the various goddesses are regarded as potentialities within each woman that can be developed in/for herself. European religious history has Christianity as one point of reference, and the previously and simultaneously existing religious folk culture as another. (The term "folk culture" differentiates between the history and culture of the under classes and the history and culture of the elite.)

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*I wish to thank here my friend Bonnie Mann, for her time, concentration and sensitivity in translating this article from german into us english. This article was published first in *Ihrsinn*, the radical feminist lesbian periodical of germany.

Feminist lesbian and heterosexual women have investigated the Christian religion in terms of historical changes in its theological content and the status of women in religious communities. The consequences that emerge are different for many women who are lesbians. Some reject the Christian religion, others develop their own belief systems and create their own space within the Christian churches.

Those who have researched women's religious folk culture have also published guides for rituals and celebrations that are related to the earth's change of seasons (Z. Budapest, 1987). Trance was and is currently used as a method to acquire knowledge that was not passed on, either orally or in writing. The point of departure here is that it is possible to return mentally/spiritually to a previous lifetime, and thereby recover experience and knowledge from the past for the present. The current use of Tarot cards (Italian: *Tarok*) is based on the premise that the cards give an answer to a question that has been posed. She who pulls the card, in principle, knows the answer and thus pulls the correct card.

The sort of description of "soul"/"spirit" that emerges through these methods of inquiry places the qualities/characteristics represented by goddesses potentially within each woman. Godliness, divinity, the sacred and goddessliness thus exist not only externally but also internally.

Various feminist lesbian and heterosexual women show that they understand themselves to be an integral part of the earth through rituals around the cycle of the seasons. Identification with nature is the foundation of feminist spirituality in contrast to the reigning concept of hierarchy in contemporary white western cultures.

Each woman is her own highest authority. The spiritual existence of each woman is not tied to *one* physical life. Soul/spirit has a different time dimension than body. Each woman potentially has access to sharing in/participating in a collective history.

The various concrete forms of feminist spirituality are criticized and judged by some feminists as "apolitical navel-gazing." I join Hallie Iglehard in rejecting this critique.

> The womenspirit movement is a necessity, not a luxury. Without it, we are operating with only half our potential tools and power. What we think we want is based on what we think is possible; one of womenspirit's most important functions is to create and implement a feminist vision. (*Feminist Dictionary*, 431)

Many lesbians develop their own spirituality. We look for our own respective values, heal our respective selves and create our connections to other lesbians; necessities if we are to survive. Since lesbians celebrate rituals with one another in accordance with their own choices,

they strengthen one another in changing themselves and their reality. I can direct my rage against rapists and against the death oriented structures of this society, by creating rituals with other lesbians. For this reason, my lesbian spirituality can be one form of resistance, especially when I create through it a new reality.

The number of publications under the heading "spirituality" has increased considerably in the last decade. In my analysis of "race"ism in feminist spirituality I will concentrate on the Motherpeace Tarot deck created by Vicky Noble and Karen Vogel. The reason for this focus is the widespread use of this Tarot deck in my predominantly white lesbian network. The questions with which I approach this Tarot deck are: how are cultures represented in the cards and how are women of color and white women represented?

Even though the title of this paper includes the term "racism," I want to argue here that the word should often be replaced by something else. In the *Feminist Dictionary*, the definition of "race"ism is: "Institutionalized discrimination, prejudice, and oppression based on race; specifically oppression by white people of people of color." The concept of "race" is based on a biologistic worldview according to which "mankind" is thought to be divided into various races. Membership in a particular race is defined according to a reified combination of hereditary physical characteristics. Since language and thus definitions are always political, so too has race theory been used in a political context. Because I reject the categorization of people into various "races," I do not want to carry over in my critique certain ways of thinking, acting or stereotyping associated with the word.

In order to distance myself from the idea that there are various races, I will use the word "culturism" as an alternative. I define culturism as an ideology structurally embodied in a society according to which persons with real or supposed "other" cultural backgrounds are oppressed, disadvantaged and discriminated against. Those who are refused access to political power are defined as culturally "other." Culturism has consequences only in the context of relations of domination.

In addition, the concept "culturism" seems to make sense because it does justice to the differences among those who are oppressed by it. The various structures of a society do not exist in isolation from one another. They are rather interwoven as culturism is interwoven with other structures of oppression and freedom. Culturism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, discrimination on the basis of age and definitions of health are interwoven with the goal of keeping these structures in place while covering over their existence. The interwovenness of oppressive structures blocks awareness of oppression and blocks solidarity(ies).

Another mechanism which functions to mask structures of oppression is the changeability of the hierarchy of oppressive structures i.e., their flexible application in relation to individuals. Although a hierarchical mechanism of oppression can be exposed, there are always individuals whose reality is not in accord with the oppressive hierarchy and who can be pointed to in the face of critiques of oppressive structures, for example, the token woman.

Oppression, prejudice, discrimination and values are most often "subtly" socialized. They are present in images, behavior, everyday interactions, in and through the presence or absence of certain persons, in existing laws, in what is done and what is not done. They are constantly maintained and recreated. Through these structures individuals are assigned their place in society according to cultural background, age, gender and their "health."

With this as theoretical groundwork, I want to explore the question of what culturistic ideas are present in the Motherpeace Tarot cards. I will begin with a focus on the perspectives of Vicky Nobel and Karen Vogel who created them.

The Tarot deck is composed of the minor arcana and the major arcana together. The cards of the major arcana illustrate cosmic energy and cosmic laws. In the minor arcana, Nobel and Vogel want to

> represent human evolution from prehistoric times through the present, an evolution that includes black and brown as well as white people; women as well as men; and old folks as well as children. In each of the four suits the numbered cards can be read in sequence to tell a story about a particular group of people or periods in history. (*Motherpeace*, 132)

Analysis and Valuation

It is the intention of Vicky Nobel and Karen Vogel that their minor arcana describe and express events that touch the microcosmos, the everyday world in which we live. Their idea for the minor arcana is that each woman who uses the cards identify with the figure "presented there, or that they imagine themselves to be participating in the situation represented" (151). If I pull a fire card, I am invited by them to identify with black people who live in Africa with a "primitive" and "prehistoric" culture that has long since ceased to exist. They seem to neglect the fact that Africa was/is an enormous continent, even in "prehistoric" times and that there were many different cultures there.

There are no houses represented in the pictures, there is almost no work to be done. The images reflect a playful joy, creative expression, concentrated strength and goal oriented energy that is outwardly directed. There are some questions that demand attention when I allow these ideas to "work on me" for awhile. Is there a reason for associating cultures in Africa, the cultures of an entire continent, with the element fire; with one element? Is there a reason for limiting the representation of the people and cultures of Africa to the beginning of "cultural evolution"? Is there a reason for not including "historical" time?[1] Nobel/Vogel owe us answers to these questions.

The description given for the air cards invites me to identify with "Aryans,"[2] Indo-Europeans and Amazons. They represent energy accentuated by reason and understanding; the activity and power of the intellect. Vogel/Nobel associate the Stone Age with this energy. In the pictures, I find more "constructed" things, such as fences, pyramids (actually found in Egypt and Central America), walls, and temples. Nakedness is not as dominant as in the fire cards. Is there a reason for associating air-energy predominantly with Aryans, Indo-Europeans and Amazons, or the element air with this epoch and this region? While I do not find an answer to these questions in Vicky Nobel's publication, I am able to recognize the sources on which she relies and from which she adopts concepts such as "Aryan," "Indo-European," "primitive" and "prehistoric" uncritically and without checking their actual meanings.

The water cards are to invite an identity with the culture of Crete during the transition from goddess cults to patriarchy, with Amazons and with "nameless" (for the author) folk cultures in northamerica. Feelings, emotions, desires, unconscious dreams and visions are associated with this time and these geographic regions. I again do not find a single card where the scene is set in the present and water energy is again associated with a short period of time in the history of these cultures.

The earth cards invite an identification with Indian culture (First Nations), a very broad concept, and with the Indian people. The American continents are huge as are the numbers of Indian cultures. The particular Indian culture being portrayed in each case is left to the imagination or awareness of the user. Is multiplicity and getting to know other cultures not important? The predominant content of the earth cards consists of work, healing practices and art in relation to spirituality. Peaceful interaction and group orientation are prominent.

It has been at least 500 years since Indian ethnic groups were able to live their connection to their land peacefully and without intervention. For most, the experience of a decent standard of living lies very far in the past. Bringing the present into the images on the cards would mean

including the fact that all Indian ethnicities have been and continue to be dispossessed of their land and cultures by the dominant white culture (Münst, 1992).

Tarot cards must in principle call up similar thoughts, feelings and associations for various users. For this reason they work with stereotypes. The alternative would be to develop new associations. I thank Shauna M. Payne of Montreal for calling to my attention this central point. The concepts in the cards and the pictures and stereotypes chosen make clear the point at which Nobel/Vogel hope to reach the users of the cards. They reify stereotypes and reductions in their images. Stereotypes and reductions are two fundamental mechanisms of culturism which serve to legitimate dominance.

These women orient their cards to an evolutionary model of thinking (19th century) with which they hope to pictorially and thematically portray "human development from prehistory to the present." Aside from the fact that this effort is to be criticized in any case, they do not meet their own questionable goal. The present is not found in the representations of the minor arcana. The minor arcana touch the everyday life of the user, who is intended to identify with the persons represented. Adrienne Rich wrote in 1981,

> . . . so long as we can identify only with white women, we are still connected to that system of objectification and callousness and cruelty called racism. (*Feminist Dictionary*, 377)

Black women, Indian women and white women are represented in such a reduced way, both in terms of energy and time period, that an identification with them in the sense of political solidarity is for me impossible. It is only possible for me to identify with the actions and situations represented in the cards if I negate the historic and political reality of the groups represented. I must devote myself to a constructed fantasy; rejuvenate prejudices; reify cliches instead of breaking through them. I must also return to earlier reductions and undermine the integral potential of each lesbian while focusing on supposed geographic and cultural attributes. The reductions offered and promoted by Noble/Vogel fundamentally contradict my understanding and vision of the integrity of individuals (which is central to my understanding of spirituality) and the integrity of cultures.

Current political reality is not only nonexistent in the cards, but in part reversed. The radically dispossessed ethnic groups of America, radically dispossessed by whites, are chosen as the ones with whom we should identify when the theme is earth, material riches and relationship to the earth. I feel this to be incomparable ignorance and exploitation,

because the relationship between land and individual remains idealized, the reality of dispossession and genocide remains unnamed.

The association of black women and men with fire energy and sexual energy is as old as it is trendy. I experience it as a kind of insult that I encounter it again in Tarot. The association of African with "prehistory" also has a long history from which I would rather distance myself. The representations given of white women and men stem from the 17th and 18th centuries and are as arrogant as they are unimaginative. One stereotype follows another.

Feminist spirituality contains the possibility of creating actuality and vision. The concepts and images of the minor arcana given by Noble/Vogel do not create a new reality, but rather repeat the cliches and negative-positive images of western white male culture. They do not begin to approach the potentialities and possibilities in feminist spirituality.

What this means concretely for me is that precisely the things that I deal with and struggle against in my confrontation with racism, I encounter again in the Tarot. There could have been an opportunity, motivated by Tarot, to look more closely, to question and to criticize the associations, and to break through the stereotypes. As a long term tool for my spiritual development, I do not believe that the Motherpeace Tarot cards are appropriate.

Endnotes

[1]The word, the concept "prehistory" is, in my opinion, absurd. It includes the idea that there was a beginning before the "real" beginning. "Prehistory" is a European concept, which establishes the beginning of history in Europe and takes European writing, specifically Old Greek and Latin, as orientation for defining history.

[2]In German speaking areas of the world, the concept "Aryan" is associated with fascist ideology and the rule of violence. Even if Vicky Nobel doesn't take the fascist concept of "Aryan" as a basis, I still find the use of the concept to be ignorant.

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And in This Corner

Bridget Collins

Often in classism discussions, the cake analogy is used. Middle class has more than enough cake. It will be there when you want it. Take a piece at your leisure. Working class has just enough. Take your piece when it's offered, or it won't be there later. Somebody else will take seconds. At poverty, there's not enough cake for everybody to get a piece. Sometimes, that means people steal or fight over it. But, sometimes, it means one person will offer, "Go ahead. Take mine." Usually, that person is a woman. She's the one I fell in love with, over and over again.

It is simply a fact that there are not enough resources available at poverty to sustain all the people there. Not enough food, not enough shelter, not enough safety, not enough health care. And what there's too much of, there's way too much of. Violence, crime, disease, despair. Need brings out the villain, but right behind, comes the hero. That's why I fell in love. That's why I'm a lesbian.

My family lived in transient poverty all over the United States. For a few months in the summer of 1968, we lived in an L.A. housing project. It was a hot, angry season. A riot broke out. We heard screaming and sirens, gunshots and shattering glass.

When the media report a riot's casualty list, they mention the race of injured police officers and of any moneyed souls who got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Neighborhood residents who get hurt or killed are assumed to be black. The white poor are rendered invisible. In the riot that surrounded my family, there was a hero to whom we were not invisible.

The woman from the next apartment came to our door. As soon as it opened, she slid inside, and shut it quickly behind her. She told us that it was dangerous outside and that we had to stay in the house. She said to close the windows and to pull the shades, and to leave all the lights off. She'd let us know when it was safe again. My father tried to bluster something about his rights. She blustered right back, something about his right to get his white ass shot off.

We lived as quietly as possible in the eye of that storm. Days passed. Very hot, sweaty days. I remember sitting on the cement floor in the darkness, just beneath the shaded window. I could hear a chaos of sounds, but mostly, I remember the smell. Acrid smoke and burning rubber. The neighbor came back to check on us a few times each day. She snuck through the back door with food and reassurances. I remember a big pot of soup, and once, she brought diapers for the babies.

The storm passed. Our doors and windows were reopened. Before long, we moved again. I don't remember that woman's name. It doesn't matter. I'm still in love with her today.

In another project in another town, I saw a woman standing in the doorway of an apartment. A man was in the street. Two children were between them on the lawn. The adults were screaming at the children. The woman pleaded for them to come to her. The man ordered them to bring their asses to him.

The children were frightened and confused. First, they'd start in one direction, and then the screaming would pull them the other way. They froze in the middle of the lawn, terrified, and began to cry.

The woman walked over to the children and whispered something. They watched as she walked over to the man and drew his fire. Very deliberately, she had made herself the target. At the first slap, she shouted, "Now! Go!" The children ran into the apartment, and slammed the door.

The man beat the woman in the street. Then, he started towards the apartment. The woman screamed, "Lock it! Make sure it's locked!"

The man pounded on the door, demanding that it be opened, and right fucking now! He tried to break the window, but this project's windows were all reinforced with chicken wire. No way.

He took a couple more swipes at the woman, and then, got into his car and drove off. For several minutes, she watched the road and waited. When the man didn't return, she went to the door, and said, "It's okay now. Open up. It's me." The door opened.

I was a little girl, watching this scene from our apartment's stoop. Again, it wasn't long before we moved. I remembered that woman though. I'm still in love with her thirty years later.

A few months ago, I took a trip on Greyhound. If you ever want a distilled education in how classism works between poverty and the working class, Greyhound provides an excellent course. That whole transportation network is essentially working class people charged with herding the poor around the country. The boarding speech for American Airlines tells you to fasten your seat belts and enjoy the trip. Greyhound

welcomes you with a list of infractions that won't be tolerated and a warning that you can be put off the bus at the driver's discretion.

On the last bus I was on, there were, in the seats just ahead of me, two middle-aged women on one side, and an older woman on the other. In front of them, the seats on each side held one man each. Some time past midnight, we rode through a town in which a state prison was located. One man told the other that he had done time there. That started a conversation in which, by turns, each man one-upped the other's jail stories. They didn't give each other congratulatory socks in the arm, but that wouldn't have been out of place.

The older woman, very slight and white-haired, joined their discussion. In a prim, accented voice, she said, "I was in prison too."

The men were skeptical. "Where?"

"In Europe." She pulled up a polyester sleeve, and showed them the tattooed number. "See?"

The men didn't know what the number meant, but the women in the opposite seat did. One of them asked her, "Because you were a Jew?"

She said, "No. I am not Jewish. I just would not be a Nazi."

The woman went on to tell the men that being in prison was nothing to be ashamed of, that prisons were more a disgrace to the jailers than the jailed. She had seen the shame behind the veil of their bravado. The men listened, quieter now. The women listened too, and soon, were telling their own stories of how prison had touched their lives and their families' lives.

I did not become part of their conversation. I eavesdropped until we arrived at my stop, some time in the wee hours of the morning. I got off the bus, once more in love with a woman whose name I'd never know.

There has been a lot of talk lately about whether we are lesbians because we choose to be or because chemistry compels us. I chose. I remember when and where and why and with whom. Poor women. Heroes. How could I not fall in love with them?

Maybe there is a genetic mandate that defines what beauty must look like through my eyes, some chromosomal map that dictates my breath be taken away in the presence of a courageous woman. I suppose that, if it can be established that my heart, my soul, my spirit, and my senses are all merely functions of my hormonal circuitry, I'll have to consider the possibility.

In the meantime, just because they have always been my heroes, I will keep falling in love with women who say, "Go ahead. Take mine."

Notes on Contributors

Bev Jo. I'm working-class, disabled (chronically ill with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome since 1981), ex-catholic, of Irish, English, German, and French ancestry, born in 1950. I've never been heterosexual and have been a Lesbian from my earliest memories. I've been a Dyke Separatist since 1972.

Bridget Collins (who does *LE*'s class column). I'm an Irish-american lesbian raised in nomadic poverty in the u.s. 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 otherwise wouldn't have it.

Debbie Dover. My background is in journalism and nonprofit management. I've been an activist for various grassroots movements on and off since 1978.

Debby Earthdaughter. I'm 34, on SSI, from european heritage, from mixed working/middle class, living on lesbian land. I'd give anything to have a vacation right now or at least go to a movie!

Elizabeth is a white, middle-class, able-bodied, thin, 28 year old Dyke Separatist living in Oakland, California. I want to thank my wonderful friends for being so amazing and for giving me their comments on this article.

Jackie Anderson. I am a Chicago Dyke; African American; over 50; loving lesbians; Mushy-butch; and constantly over-committed.

Linda Strega. I'm a working-class Italian-descent ex-catholic Lesbian Separatist. I've been a Lesbian since 1972 and a Separatist since 1973. I co-wrote *Dykes-Loving-Dykes: Dyke Separatist Politics for Lesbians Only* with Bev Jo and Ruston, available through Battleaxe, P.O. Box 9806, Oakland, CA 94613.

Marilyn Murphy has been a feminist activist since 1969. She has taught courses in women's history and feminist issues, organized consciousness-raising groups, community action groups, rape crisis centers, women's studies programs and women's centers. She is the author of *Are You Girls Traveling Alone? Adventures in Lesbianic Logic* (1991).

Michal Brody is an unrepentant aging radical hippie dyke and working class Jew. She was told as a child that she would grow up to be the first girl to play Major League Baseball. So far she's not.

Pat Wasisco is currently a Chicago Dyke.

Pam Bailey. I am a radical academic dyke (a contradiction?) with whiteskin privilege and a mixed race heritage. I come from an upwardly-mobile mixed-class background and am differently-abled. My goal is to participate in the creation of a perfect (or as close as we can get) lesbian society.

Rainbow is a crone and member of the Old Lesbian Organizing Committee (OLOC). She enjoys the ocean and Florida sunshine, does architectural drafting, illustration, cartoons, found object goddesses, and history timelines. She plays dulcimer and is a member of "The Amazing Almost All Girl String Band."

Raewyn and Cilbey. We are two vegan, sober lesbian separatists who live in rural Aotearoa on lesbian only land. Raewyn is mixed race and Cilbey is white.

Senganata Münst. Born 1957 into a rather poor white family in germany. After coming out at 21 as a feminist lesbian, I changed my life in many respects. The feminist lesbian movement, cultural anthropology and painting are my entwined three passions and focus of my life.

zana. i'm 47, disabled jew from lower middle class, in my 14th year of struggle and joy on lesbian land.

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