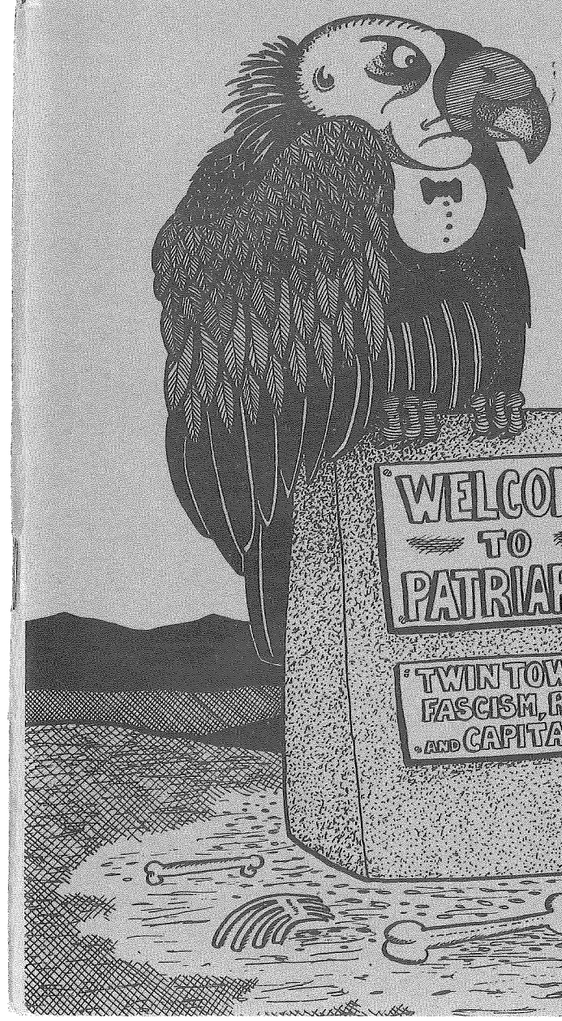
Trouble and Strife

a radical feminist magazine No.6 £1.95



Maps of patriarchy: Christine Delphy reviewed

British feminists and Northern Ireland

Women who dressed as men

Coalitions: the politics of difference

Women in Russia today

Feminist Fiction: Writing and Roaring

Trouble and Strife is cockney rhyming slang for wife. We chose this name because it acknowledges the reality of conflict in relations between women and men. As radical feminists, our politics come directly from this tension between men's power and women's resistance.

Please note our new address:
Trouble and Strife, c/o Women's Centre, 50 Bethel Street, Norwich, Norfolk, Britain.

Trouble and Strife is produced collectively by Lynn Alderson, Dena Attar, Cath Jackson, Liz Kelly, Sophie Laws, Diana Leonard, Judy Stevens and Ruth Wallsgrove, with help from Ruth Elizabeth, Renate Günther, Frances MacIntyre, Lyn May, Pam Muttram, Carol Reeves, Sara Scott and Paddy Stamp.

Although we take collective responsibility for the contents, we do not necessarily agree with every article we print – only that we feel it is interesting. The collective is also responsible for titles and illustrations. Unsolicited articles are welcomed; please enclose a stamped addressed envelope. We do not intend to publish poetry or fiction.

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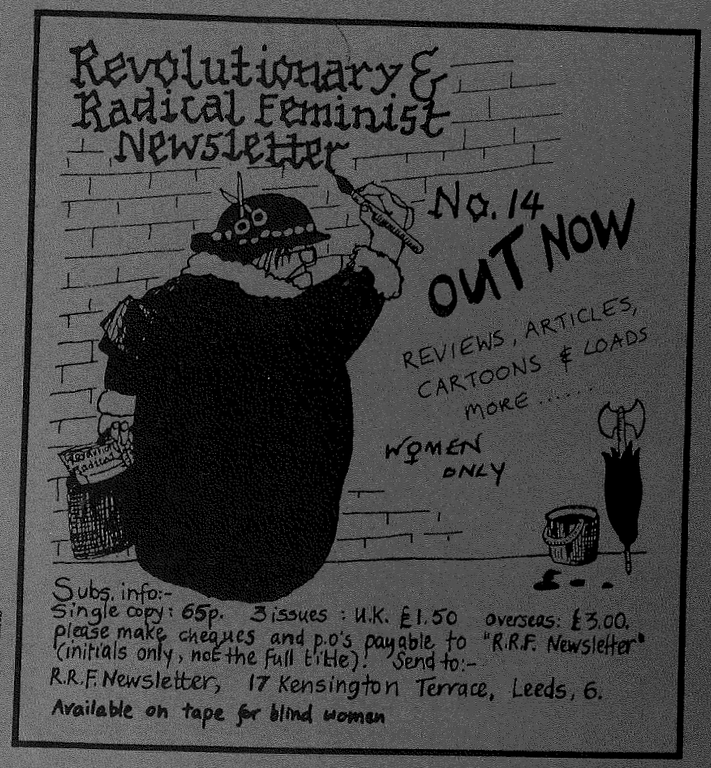


LESBIAN WRITERS
Scripts still wanted for Gay Sweatshop's 10th anniversary festival of new writing
Drill Hall, October '85
Deadline for receiving scripts: August 16th
Work from black and disabled writers particularly welcome.
Contact address: *GS x 10, c/o Drill Hall, 16 Chenies Street, London WC1.*

Trouble and Strife

Cover by Cath Jackson

Contents No.6

Letters: Help us make more Trouble and Strife; Co-parenting with men; Lesbian co-parenting; IVF an anti-woman technology 2

Other People's Revolutions? British Feminists and Northern Ireland *Teresa Thornhill.* 7

Silenced: Black women as domestic workers *Marianne Collins.* 15

Suffering from 'Equality': the lives and politics of Soviet women, a review *Bridget Foster* 17

Women who Dressed as Men: cross-dressing in the 18th century *Lynne Freidli.* 24

Coalition Politics: turning the century *Berenice Johnson Reagon* 30

Maps of Patriarchy: a classic review of Christine Delphy's *Close to Home* *Sigrid Nielsen* 36

Writing and Roaring: in search of the truly political feminist novel *Patricia Duncker.* 41

Even Superwoman gets the Blues: what counts as 'success' for feminists *Rosy Williamson.* 47

Writing Our Own History: A Rather Mean Cocktail Party. *Georgina Ashworth* talks to Diana Leonard about Britain's response to the UN Decade for Women . . . 52

Letters

Help us make more Trouble and Strife!

Dear Readers,
Trouble and Strife has now been publishing for two years. Although we have built up a healthy list of subscribers and sell many more copies through bookshops, the cost of producing the magazine is high and continues to rise. Unlike many feminist groups at the moment, we do not receive funding from any source. We think it important to retain our independence and, anyway, filling in forms applying for money can become a full-time occupation. Therefore it will come as no surprise to you that we are having problems getting enough income to cover the costs of production.

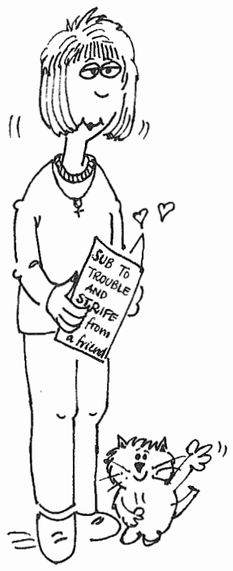
We do not want to keep putting up the price as we think it is already higher than many women can easily afford and than we would like to see. The basis for our continued survival lies in subscriptions. We receive more of the income from these than from the copies we sell in shops. If every woman who now subscribes directly to *Trouble and Strife* got a friend to subscribe (or bought a subscription for her) we'd be well on the way to financial stability. So, if you want to see the magazine continue, please help us by:

1. Subscribing (if you do not already or you need to renew your subscription).
2. Get a friend to subscribe – or buy a subscription for her.
3. Send a supporting subscription/donation (if you can afford to).
4. Make sure that *Trouble and Strife* is available from your local bookshops and library and included in your Women's Studies reading lists etc. If not, ask why not!

We should say that none of the women on the *Trouble and Strife* collective are paid.

Another piece of news is that we are in the process of becoming a limited company – a necessary precaution against litigation and financial ruin! This will involve us in a certain amount of extra costs related to the process of registration and will also mean that we will need an accountant to audit our accounts. Are there any women accountants out there willing to donate their labour to this worthwhile cause? It won't require a great deal of work as our books will be in good order.

Trouble and Strife is read by thousands of women throughout Britain and is getting a longer list of overseas subscribers. We'd like any suggestions you may have about raising more money and getting the magazine better known. We need your letters and comments, your criticisms and contributions, so
Hoping to hear from you,
The *Trouble and Strife* Collective.



DRAWINGS BY LYN MAY

Playing with fire: anti-woman technologies

I was surprised that Naomi Pfeffer failed to see the significant difference between 'In-vitro fertilisation' (IVF) and the technologies which make it up and have been used for considerably longer.

As she pointed out fertilisation is carried out in a laboratory – in a petri dish (test tube to the media) to be precise, the fertilised egg is allowed to divide before being replaced in the womb. Current medical excitement has been aroused as the time before implantation must occur is being slowly increased.

A recent article in New Scientist[1] made it quite clear that the present state of knowledge on IVF is inadequate. What is known is the product of trial and error. We cannot even be reassured that it has been perfected in animals. The nutrients a mouse embryo needs are anyway quite different from those a human embryo needs. In fact the exact requirements of the latter are not known. It is known that in-vitro embryos grow very slowly, and implanted embryos develop much further in the same time.

The success rate of IVF even at the stage of laboratory fertilisation is low[1]. One study found 30 successfully produced embryos from 330 egg donations. This shows the state of the science!

So the correct environment for the fertilised egg is not understood, nor is the process of fertilisation. The MRC unit of Reproductive Biology analysed the chromosomes of miscarried IVF embryos, 2 out of 11 had only half the normal number of chromosomes. This means parthenogenesis had occured, division without sperm penetration of the ovum, normally very rare[8]. In a further study 2 out of 3 embryos showed chromosome abnormalities due to one pair of chromosomes failing to divide[1].

Scientists and doctors are playing with fire, using methods they ill-understand to create future people. The environment is abnormal at the most crucial time. We must remember the Stilboestrol affair – women given this hormone during pregnancy gave birth to female babies who later developed cancers of the vagina (normally very rare) at a young age. So if the 'recipe' for the culture in the petri dish is not quite right what disasters will we see in children born of IVF in years to come?

Doctors and scientists did not have the good of women, or even people, in mind when they developed these technologies. They want more control over women and reproduction (research is already going on to develop artificial wombs so women will be dispensible). Eugenic motives are high on their list of priorities. Naomi Pfeffer's paragraph[2] in which she says "a study showed that a large proportion of women at an NHS IVF clinic were working class" followed by "Pelvic infections are more prevalent amonst poorer women" is naive in the extreme. Louise Brown's mother was working class – which is highly significant as the 'first' in the UK. Working class women are being experimented on. Needless to say, pelvic infections which lead to infertility are preventable, particularly when they are associated with an IUD.

The option of IVF which is so little understood, is not a real choice at present. I feel a perfect analogy is a nuclear power station – it produces expensive electricity, the safety mechanisms are not adequately developed, but the by products are worth it. Due to the nature of the technology if an accident happens it will be a big disaster.

The availability of IVF is yet another pressure on infertile women – if the technology is there, how much more difficult to say no. (Louise Brown's mother described these pressures).

One of the appalling things in medical treatment of infertility is the textbook advice to "never tell the woman she is infertile"[3]. I accept for some women that finality may be too much (and no-one can ever be that certain), but for some this would allow them to grieve, to mourn their assumed fertility and maybe to accept alternatives (childless or not).

We must remember that the IVF programme in Britain was set up as a commercial venture. Steptoe and Edwarde's careers were made by Louise Brown's birth. Steptoe was described as her father!

The implications of IVF are far reaching:
1. Sex selection – evidence on the dreadful consequences of the widespread use of this was given to the Warnock Committee – and ignored. It would basically mean no chance of sexual equality and increased oppression[4].
2. Eugenics – the Warnock Committee recommended that "it should be accepted practise to offer donated gametes and embryos to those at risk of transmitting hereditary disorders". 'Disorders' is not defined – it could include asthma[5].
3. The techniques often used in conjunction with IVF include superovulation which involves taking a drug which has significant side effects (in some women) and painful ovulation. In addition laparoscopy, a surgical technique which is painful and not without risks. (Both from personal experience.)
4. The pregnancy and birth are likely to be more technologised. As multiple pregnancies are frequent and IVF pregnancies are seen as 'valuable' pregnancies women often have to stay in hospital for long periods of 'confinement'.
5. IVF is used as 'treatment' for oligospermia (low sperm count). The woman is subjected to all that IVF entails in order that a man can have a child that is 'biologically his'.

1. Omar Sattaur, "New conception threatened by old morality", *New Scientist* September 27th 1984, pp12–17.
2. *Trouble and Strife* No.5, p49.
3. University Education Postgraduate Institute Lesson 19.
4. Warnock, para 9.4–9.12, Recommendation 22.
5. Warnock, para 9.2 and 9.3, Recommendation 27.
6. Warnock, para 13.13, Recommendation 17.
7. Warnock, para 2.5–2.7.
8. Roslyn R Angell et al, "Chromosome abnormalities in human embryos after IVF", *Nature* Vol 303, 26 May 1983.

6. It has been proposed that it can be used in conjunction with embryo banks so that women can be sterilised and later have IVF pregnancies – yet more hazards for the woman, rather than developing effective, safe contraception.

7. The use of IVF for surrogacy, particularly egg donation has far reaching implications. Egg flushing is a painful, hazardous procedure. No-one knows the effect the procedure may have on the implanted embryo – the sudden change of metabolism being suddenly 'shot' into a 'test tube'. Many women in the Third World are worried about the use that may be made of them as cheap surrogates (see *Trouble and Strife* No. 5, Amsterdam conference report). An American gynaecologist was quoted saying that after all one does not even need to supplement their diet. Surrogacy can thus be made profitable as fees to Third World women can be less.

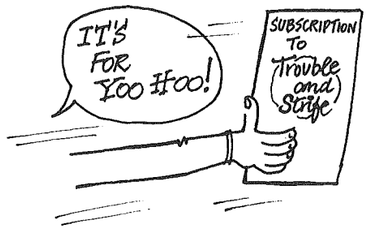
8. The commercialisation of egg/embryo donation, embryo flushing and surrogacy devalues the meaning of human life.[6]

9. Doctors decide who has access to these techniques. The Warnock Committee recommended that only stable heterosexual couples should be considered[7]. Although they also recommended a controlling body to oversee decisions with considerable lay representation, who will decide *which* lay people will sit on it? Doctors again?

10. Very little work is done into the prevention of infertility or the causes of it. One paper recently showed the follicular fluid from infertile women had higher levels of insecticides. Prevention does not rake in the money, nor allow more power over women and their fertility.

11. The concept of 'spare embryos' opens another massive area of concern. These could be experimented on, genetically manipulated and then implanted into an unknowing woman.

Infertility is a personal sadness to many people, but we cannot escape from the "structural, political and ethical implications for women and society". Women must make their choices, but they have to be informed. We, as feminists, have a duty to spread the word that these technologies are fundamentally anti-person and anti-woman and not adequately understood. We are treading on a time bomb.
In sisterhood,
Helen Murrell
Newcastle.



Lesbian Co-parenting

I must comment on Lynne Harne's statement (*Trouble and Strife* No.3), "unless more support and consideration is forthcoming for more lesbian feminists, some lesbian mothers will continue to rely on men for child-care". Having taken this politic to heart in the early 1970s, I some time later became involved in co-parenting, with all the good times, hard work, confusion, distress etc, that involves. However when the biological mother had had enough of the difficulties of co-parenting, and more offers of help from other women, I was left without rights and without access (except for one hour, once a year on the child's birthday). Now, after two and a half years the situation is barely changed tho' I am still waiting.

The calls for involvement by childless women with mothers *must* be realistic if we are going to raise our children with humane values and compassion. What kind of society are we really trying to create? Many of us have experienced much more pain – exclusion, denial, invalidation, ridicule, rip-off and general abuse – from women than we ever imagined possible. Is this really how we want to use our power?
Yours in sisterhood,
Jean Freer,
Oxford.

FOR shared parenting with men

Dear sisters,
After reading Lynne Harne's article ("Lesbian Custody and the New Myth of the Father", Issue 3) about fathering, I felt that I'd like to expand the discussion about forms of parenting and question what radical practice might be, by presenting some arguments *for* shared parenting with men, that run counter to the general conclusions Lynne reaches. I think she is confusing a number of issues: legal status as parent, biological parenting, parenting as work and parenting as pleasure.

But first I'd like to say that I enjoyed Lynne's article and I thought she presented, very effectively, the situation that many lesbian mothers find themselves in, with regard to the biological father's rights to custody. We must resist notions that a woman's sexual preference or political lifestyle make her unsuitable as a primary parent. However, I think we must also resist the argument that being a biological mother automatically confers the right to be a primary parent, and the assumption that goes along with it that carers who are not biological mothers cannot be as good, and should have no rights. I won't deny that there are problems about sharing parenting with men, but the general conclusions which Lynne draws, and which I have heard in other places put forward as a radical feminist solution; that men should not have active involvement as parents because this can only be bad for women, I cannot agree with. Instead, I'd like to argue the opposite, that shared parenting (with men and/or women) can be a radical solution, not just in the socialisation of children, which isn't the issue here, but in its potential for the women involved. I'd also like to use my own circumstances as an illustration since I share the parenting of a two year old with a man, and I'm expecting another baby in May. Consequently, I'm writing about sharing with a man, although some of the issues would arise in an attempt to share parenting with another woman.

It seems to me that our position, in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), on parenting has never been properly developed. In the 1960s we argued that much of our oppression was due to our socially defined role as 'mothers', and that we had to change that role by involving men both to share the hard work and therefore free us, and in order to break the chain whereby children acquired views of what it meant to be male or female. Much of this early stuff on shared parenting was naive, and softly liberal, and didn't reckon on the complications involved such as the subtle ways in which men still manage to avoid the work, and the fact that close mothering can be immensely pleasurable and it is hard for us to give some of it up to share with another adult. We also didn't reckon on the repercussions and bitterness that occur when parents separate. We are now facing up to these things, but for some women the practice now seems to be to reject the notion of shared parenting completely and adopt a sort of maternalist ideology which stresses the importance of biological motherhood and parenting which can be shared only with other women. It seems to me that this is the equivalent of giving up the struggle, whereas I think we should be spending more time examining exactly what the problems are, arguing about what we think parenting should be and what strategies we can adopt to make it what we want.

I have chosen to live with the biological father of my children, not because I deliberately chose heterosexuality or the nuclear family as a life style, but because like many women I very much wanted children and found myself in a relationship

with a man I liked better than anyone else and who, most importantly, shared my ideas about parenting. In theory we wanted to share parenting equally and the benefits of that for me were that I wouldn't become totally absorbed in being a 'mother' and would be supported so that I could carry on with a career I enjoy, and for him that he could experience the closeness and dependence of a child: an experience we both think is wonderful and like no other. There would be benefits not only for us, but for our child. He (he's a boy) should see that a male parent can be expected to take just as good care of him physically and emotionally as a female parent, and that I have an important life of my own that sometimes takes priority over him. In practice of course it's not perfect, but that's because it's reality and there is a lot of resistance all round to attempts to do things differently, also, we're not uncomplicated people ourselves. Theory is easy, it's Practice that's the struggle.

There is a spoken and unspoken contract between the man and myself which is, that the right to be a parent is conferred through the amount of parenting work done, and if he does equal shit work he has equal rights. At the same time we recognise that the law would grant him equal status as 'parent' as soon as we put his name on the birth certificate — despite the fact that he and I aren't married. But that legal status is not *determined* by the childcare he does and these things should not be confused. I have no illusions that we're in a life-time relationship, and I never committed myself to this one on those terms. I don't know what will happen when we adults decide that we no longer want to live together, and I expect it will be horrible and painful for all of us including the children, but I don't see that as a reason to change what we have been attempting to achieve so far. I think the end of any relationship, especially involving children, is bound to be painful.

I disagree strongly with Lynne's statement that men's "involvement in child-rearing, since they have the power, can only mean a transmission and reinforcement of those values that as feminists we are working so hard to get rid of" because I feel this implies that male power is unassailable and invulnerable and that if we avoid personal struggle with it by avoiding relationships with men, we can deny it and somehow that will make it go away. For many of us the possibility of shared parenting with an equally committed *woman* did not exist. And like Emma Goldman who said she wasn't interested in a revolution with no dancing, I'm not interested in a revolution with no parenting. In order to have the pleasure of it I'll happily take on the struggle. Some of that struggle is mine with myself against my internalised maternal ideology.

I also think we are in great danger of reinforcing male power by embracing 'mothering' as biological female behaviour. The legal concept of 'fathering' has for a long time had little to do with parenting, but is a position of social and economic power. Victorian fathers did almost nothing that we would recognise as childrearing but they had enormous legal power as parents, and mothers almost none. And, from the little I understand of Moslem family law the situation is the same, despite women sharing parenting with other women. In fact, patriarchal power seems to be inversely proportional to childcare, ie the more childcare you do the less power you have. The legal status of 'father' is not conferred on men by virtue of anything they do, although what they do may be used to reinforce their prior patriarchal power. Equally, reducing the amount of childcare a male parent might do will not reduce his legal parental rights: this, it seems to me, is identifying the wrong solution to the problem. But even worse, by rejecting the involvement of men in ways which could be helpful to us, like sharing the unpaid work so that we can continue with paid work and have some form of economic independence at the end of a relationship, we achieve few gains for ourselves on any front.

In sisterhood,
Gill Kirkup
Milton Keynes

OTHER PEOPLE'S REVOLUTIONS

Teresa Thornhill takes an honest and self-critical look at the underlying emotions and fears that link us to struggles outside our own experience and that influence our choice of political priorities.

I am often asked why I became involved in Irish solidarity work. This is an attempt to give an answer. What I say is of course about me, my personal motivations, but I think there must be something in common between myself and other white British women who are active in anti-imperialist groups. I'm writing this to help myself and other British women be conscious about what we're doing. Some of what I say is not very attractive; it's about a process of sitting tight on one's privileges. But I think it may be useful to say it.

Obviously British women in anti-imperialist groups have their 'political' reasons for the work they do, and a lot could be written about those. But ultimately, we have a 'choice' about whether or not to be active. I don't believe that we choose to be active out of some sort of political altruism. We give our support because contributing to the struggle *gives us* something, and because we perceive, however dimly, that in some sense our interests are at stake too. I am trying to go beneath the political, as in thought-out, conscious reasons and to look at what, in a more personal way, has moved me to be active.

One of my political reasons for doing work in solidarity with women in Northern Ireland is the awareness that many women live in situations which are tougher than mine — in the case of Northern Ireland, war — and that if we claim to have any 'radical' politics — feminist, socialist or anti-imperialist — we should support them. We are all oppressed by men, but women in Northern Ireland are also oppressed by imperialism, and the imperialism of a government acting *in our name*. That's a good reason to do some political work in support of women in Northern Ireland. But to do a lot of work, I think one must be moved on a level which is deeper than intellectual. I have been questioning myself while I got more involved in work around women and Ireland and it has begun to be a meaningful part of my life.

Generally I think it's hard to care passionately about the situation of other people when it's very different from your own — unless you have a personal friendship with someone in that situation; or have been in that situation yourself; or have old connections with — in my case — Ireland.

I had personal connections with Ireland, of a sort — an Irish grandfather and a great-aunt, both from the South. But the first thing that really moved me, with regard to the situation in the North, was reading *Tell them everything*[1] about the

women in Armagh prison who were living in cells with their own shit plastered on the walls.

Knowing that your own life is too comfortable you latch onto the most extreme suffering as a counterpoint to it. I walked round with the images conjured up by that book in the back of my mind for a year, before I actually 'did' anything in response to it. I then went on the International Women's Day Delegation to Armagh[2]. I could say a lot about the experience of the Delegation and the eighteen months since, during which I have been quite active. But what I'm trying to work out is, what makes me go on wanting to be involved?

Some of my reasons are very personal. One is that it has given me an opportunity to explore *fear*. Over the last 18 months I have read several women's accounts of being strip-searched in Armagh. And then I heard a woman speak about being sexually harassed by the RUC[3]. We were rapt, listening. Horrified. But also I was half needing, half wanting to hear it. Listening to her allowed me to bring out of the cupboard my own fear of experiences like that, and my sense that they do occur and that I've only avoided them so far by chance of the country and political situation I was born in – ie, by a hair's breadth.

I have always had a horror of torture, prisons, rape, men with dogs. Ever since I was a small kid, I 'knew' it was there – and that one day it could happen to *me*. When I was about 14 I read *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler, about a dissident in Russia held by the police in a cell within a maze-like prison, expecting to be tortured or put to death. The story felt almost familiar, as if I had always known that one day *I* could be in a situation like that, subject to that kind of test of my endurance. Reading the book just brought the fear out into the light.

With reference to the RUC sexually harassing women: every girl and woman has an instinctive knowledge of what it would be like to have your sex used against you by policemen or jailors. Because we have all had our sex used against us by men, in smaller or larger ways, whether or not we have experienced a rape.

When I was a child my father used his sexuality as a means of exerting authority over me and my sister. His sexuality was always near the surface and we sensed that. Although he hardly ever hit us, he used to shout and in his voice the power that he wielded as a man was somehow bound up with his sexuality. When he lost his temper it was this threatening, intrinsically sexual power that intimidated me and stopped me from arguing with him even when I thought he was wrong or felt he was trampling on my needs. (It also left me incredibly angry with him.)

Most women must have had this experience in some form – whether with their father or a brother, a teacher or a boss. Besides, women of all ages know what it is to be sexually harassed on the street; and some women have been in relationships with violent men. Whatever our individual experience, the media's constant accounts of acts of sexual violence to women will never allow us to forget for long what always 'could' happen to us. And even though we transform our fear into anger, we know that there are situations where anger wouldn't stop the man doing what he wants to do.

White middle class women in Britain read about the sexual abuse of women by soldiers and security men from time to time – the British press reports that sort of thing when it's happening sufficiently far away – in Guatemala, Chile . . . It doesn't require such a big leap of the imagination to translate the fear we know into a notion of what those women have gone through; to perceive how, in a war situation, all the sexual aggression men have towards women would be unleashed against *you* as an "enemy" woman. All the usual inhibiting factors would be removed.

What I felt while this woman was telling us how the RUC had interrogated her over seven days, made her sit in front of them bleeding into the one pair of jeans, and done other, worse things to her she wasn't willing to speak about – was both horror, and a kind of relief. Relief to have it said out in the open that this specific maltreatment was what had happened to this particular woman. The next day after those women talked to us I felt sick to my stomach, I felt changed by the knowledge they had given us. Shaken, shocked, brought to a standstill. It was as if the outside world had finally been brought right to my door.

If you grow up and live your life as basically sheltered as I have done, but in modern, information-swilling Britain, you develop a sense that somewhere 'out there' – and you're never quite sure how far away – some extremely unpleasant and very dangerous things are going on. Every now and then this sneaking, only half-conscious question comes up in your mind – "why am I different? why aren't those things happening to me?" And of course the answer you get is silence. A voice inside tells you to keep still, to breathe only shallowly, and hopefully the 'evil-world', which up to now has not turned its fangs on you, will continue to leave you off its hit list.

Women like me also know that the reason the 'evil-world' has 'let us off' so far, is because we are white, middle class and British. We know that is a good reason why we should get up and protest about what it is doing to other people. And we know that, if we do so, we will begin to lose our 'immunity' from the forces of repression.

Anyway, when finally one day you encounter the thing which has always inspired you with a nagging fear, close-up, specific, attacking another woman you have met as a flesh-and-blood person, you experience both horror, and a strange kind of relief. This woman who I am looking at across this room is smoking a cigarette and she looks tired, this woman has lived through seven days in RUC custody. She is still herself, a woman; I can see she has suffered; and now I am sitting in the same room as her, listening to her talk about it.

Relief. So here is the thing dreaded. Here is a woman who has been through it – and survived. No more need I, nor can I, pretend I didn't know it happens.

Leaving aside the political situation momentarily, I want to protest about what women like her are going through in terms of sexual harassment, because as a woman I know what sexual harassment is about and it makes me angry that any woman should be subjected to it. But what these women are going through is intrisically linked to the political situation. The fact that they are being put through this *by the British government*, has brought home to me what 'imperialism' really means, and made me want to be active for British withdrawal.

Acknowledging pain

Another 'reason' underlying why I have gone on being involved in Irish work is to do with pain. Contact with the lives of people in the North, coming to know about people's sufferings there, has triggered in me a repressed need to grieve, to acknowledge pain. Something we aren't good at in Britain.

When on this year's delegation we came back from the prison visits to the house where we were staying; Ann told us about her brother in prison in England, and then spoke of a whole list of people, friends of hers, who had been killed; several of us started crying. I was crying inside, my eyes were wet although I didn't break down and sob. But I wanted to. I felt all the grief, all the raw pain of events in my past when I had been hurt but not acknowledged it. I felt all that rising up from deep inside me to just behind my eyes and I wanted to cry and cry and cry, and it felt like, if I had started, my crying would have gone on and on for ever. Or rather, it would have carried into and through a thick dark middle of suffering from which I could not imagine ever re-emerging.

The traumas we all went through that weekend in Belfast gave us the right to ask each other – and the people we were staying with – for support and affection. We were all feeling so shaken up, vulnerable; in fact it wasn't a question of asking, we simply gave and took support amongst each other in a way that rarely happens at home. And it appeared that, in Belfast, people do that for each other all the time. Ann who we were staying with said you expect after you've been on a visit into the prison to need to come home and have a good cry, you need a stiff drink and your people around you.

So my/our political activities are not purely a matter of conscience, or abstract belief. They are related to our own needs. It's good that it's like that. If we were politically active purely because we felt we

'should' be that would make us very different from the people we are trying to support. For Northern Irish Republicans, their politics come out of their everyday lives and sufferings. If ours did not also, we would be very different creatures from them.

It's vitally important, however, for us to be aware of what is moving us to action. Now I begin to understand the thing about fear, I feel a bit better. Before, I sometimes felt I was becoming *obsessed* with torture and brutality. As I learned more about what was going on – strip searches, beatings by the police, prison conditions – sometimes I caught myself off-guard being almost fascinated by that kind of suffering. But now I have some understanding, at least, of why I am drawn to hear about those things. On the far side of the fear and the pain is anger. I can begin to use that anger to fight back – for Irish women and for me.

Wanting revolution

But there's another whole aspect to British people's motivation to do solidarity work that needs discussing. On the question of why British people take up the issue of Ireland – what I have to say applies to the male left as well as to women in anti-imperialist groups. It's called 'wanting a revolution'. Those of us with a taste for being involved in political movements, who grew up in 1960s and '70s white and middle class Britain, with its atmosphere of apathy and cynicism about politics; we who, being full of radical idealism did not want to get involved in what we saw as boringly 'everyday' struggles for better working conditions or housing . . .; we found a dearth of opportunity to use our energies. And lobbying and committee-style politics had no appeal – we didn't just want to chip away at the edifices of power.

What some of us really wanted, and the only thing that would be good enough for us, was – to be involved in a 'revolution'.

I was a child in May '68. I can't talk about what was happening on the left in the early seventies because, at the time, I wasn't interested. From the big strikes of '73 and '74, I, in my youthful arrogance, had formed a vague impression that it was all a question of people who weren't really so badly off (by world poverty standards) demanding more and more money. It all seemed terribly boring and not, to my taste, about sufficiently 'basic' issues. (Why I insisted on measuring what people had by world standards, rather than national standards, I'm not quite sure. Perhaps because at school our social consciences were directed carefully away from home, towards what was happening in places like India and Brazil. And also because I had been brought up not to understand or respect working class people and it did not occur to me to question the little I heard or read in newspapers of what those strikes were about.

Growing up in a quiet South of England country town, I remember 'discovering' South America. It completely captivated my imagination. I didn't have a clue what was going on there politically. I just knew there was extreme poverty and that people were still struggling to live a very basic peasant existence; that outside Rio de Janiero thousands lived in shanty towns that clung to the hillside, and there was no electricity and no running water. I remember feeling that that was where you would go if you wanted to be involved in 'real' struggles, about 'real' life and death issues – the only ones I was interested in.

When I left school I started saving money and eventually went off to Peru, where for a brief and painful six months I did 'community' work in a shanty town under the auspices of a North American priest. Although I still wasn't consciously 'political' what I did expressed one of the dreams of a section of young middle class 'progressive minded' English people. A group of people who, I think it is fair to say, were generally ignorant of the oppressions perpetrated in, and by, the Britain in which they had grown up. Look how the middle class left's darling has for so long been Chile, and more recently Central America. Of course those struggles are very important and should be supported, but I think often we don't support them for the right reasons. It's *easier* to support a people-in-struggle fully when the struggle is being waged a good safe distance away; and where, as a result, the issues seem to be so 'basic'.

Looking to your doorstep

One of the reasons why, later on when I began to be political, I didn't 'let' myself get involved in Latin American solidarity work was a strong sense that it would be too easy to romanticise the struggles there. In my six months in South America I had learnt something about the dishonesty and counter-productiveness of the 'missionary' mentality. Also, I had heard a lot of people say "British people should look to what

CATH JACKSON

your *own* government is doing, *on your doorstep.*"

So I got involved in Irish solidarity work. I felt less uneasy about my motives. It was 'near home'. I had Irish family two generations back. And living in England, the whole question of Northern Ireland felt much too raw, much too painful and near the bone, to be one where there would be temptation to be active in a dishonest way. From where I was sitting, shrouded as it was in not knowing and not understanding, in paranoia and fear, the whole situation looked far too ugly to be romanticised.

Now, three years later, I can see that it *is* possible to romanticise the struggle in Northern Ireland. To see the nationalist movement as having 'revolutionary potential' because that is what you want it to have. Not to see the deep reactionariness of some strands of that movement. We so much want things to be simple. To know which side we're on, and be able to stand rooted firmly to the spot, 'without a shadow of a doubt'. And yet, if we — British people in solidarity movements — refuse to see the North (or anywhere else) for itself; if we insist on seeing it through our revolution-tinted spectacles, then we abdicate a fundamental responsibility. Again, it's another form of imperialism. Since we couldn't get any 'revolutionary' political change going in our own country (— or didn't want to?) we take our need for that abroad.

When as a British person you do solidarity work with people struggling in circumstances very different from your own it is not quite clear who you are accountable to. To them? To your home 'community'? — but they're part of the problem. As a feminist, to womankind? — yes, but at present much of the British women's liberation movement is part of the problem too. Obviously we should see ourselves to some extent accountable to the people we are supposedly in solidarity with; but not to the extent of relinquishing our right to form our own independent judgements from our particular vantage point, which is different from theirs; and of acting on these judgements.

An example: tactics and actions have to be judged in their contexts and it may be quite reasonable to say that you support women working jointly with men in national liberation struggles in other countries, while you believe in an autonomous separatist struggle for women's liberation in England. But we have to be careful. That trips off the tongue very nicely, makes what is a vexed question for some feminists, seem all very simple.

We have to be sure we know the implications of what we're saying: it would be hypocritical, and irresponsible, to be saying that we support those women in the North working jointly with men if we for the life of us imagine feeling able to do so ourselves faced with the same situation. Irresponsible, because women in the North have to *live* with the reality of it, while we can sit here and talk about it, without perhaps fully understanding what we're saying.

Romanticising politicisation

What is it about the situation in the North that British people seize on and risk romanticising? For British lefties, going to Belfast, it is stunning to find, for instance, that in West Belfast everybody you meet is politicised. Ten year old kids have more political naus than the average twenty year old in England. Amongst the nationalist community, everyone is 'sussed' about the police, the power they wield and where it comes from; and not only about the police, but about the state as a whole. It's very natural of course that people would be like that, given the situation. It's got nothing to do with 'the left' being better organised or more skilled at mobilising people than it is in England — on the contrary, the main actors in the situation in the North do not include a 'left' as such. It's got a lot more to do with the fact that when you've got a foreign army occupying your streets, you fairly quickly become wised as to why they're there, whose interests they're protecting, and you are *obliged* to link up with all the members of your community in order to defend yourselves against them. People unite, perforce.

In England the political situation is very different from that in Northern Ireland. Before the miners' strike, anyway, the left had not involved itself in a situation of remotely comparable intensity. It is true

that within the Black communities people have had to unite against racism and police and state abuses for decades; but the white 'left' has only very recently shown any awareness of this (for reasons I won't discuss here!)

Well, for white members of the British left, a glimpse of the degree of politicisation of nationalists in Northern Ireland is very exciting. We stay in people's homes and they talk about the situation and their lives and how as a movement they are organising themselves. Feminists go over on the International Women's Day delegation and talk to women in Sinn Fein about the way they are beginning to get a hearing when they raise issues to do with women . . . Because we are lazy, and because the reality is full of contradictions we are afraid to face, it is easy for us to come back to England chirping that not only are women in the North confronting the police and the British army with a courage that leaves us speechless, but that also they have succeeded in getting debate on feminist issues going within the group that is at the forefront of their struggle.

I'm not saying that these claims are untrue, but that it's the sort of stuff that it's dead easy to exaggerate, to see what you want to see rather than what actually is. To romanticise the Republican movement is irresponsible. For British women to do that is fundamentally unhelpful to Irish women . . . which is not to say it is for us to criticise, publically, the Republican movement. We have to be careful not to do that. But if, as women/feminists, we refuse to open our eyes to just what a complex, and difficult situation Republican women are in — then we do little to help them.

Connected to the will to be involved in a 'revolution', and the resultant romanticising of the situation in Ireland is the ploy of using the Irish question as a stick to beat Britain with. This can be seen most clearly in the operation of certain so-called 'revolutionary' groups. These groups seem to attract young people from wealthy, upper middle class backgrounds who are 'discovering' left wing politics for the first time. They get the opportunity to *use* political and social issues as a way of working out their anger with authority. Working out your anger with authority is fine, everyone needs to do it, but it's not fine for people from privileged backgrounds to do it by co-opting other people's struggles for the purpose. If what you really want is to scream at your parents, then you do just that.

This kind of behaviour isn't altogether confined to these groups. It is only in the last eighteen months that I have *begun* to realise what a history you inherit, if you are white, British and middle class. Before that, from childhood, I had strong, uneasy instincts about it. But no idea of just how bad the history of British imperialism really is; nor of the racism that pervades this country now.

Seeing the realities

In beginning to realise all this, meeting and working with Black and Asian people, and Irish people, and beginning to be able to hear what they are saying, I, like many other women in a similar position, have gone through a period of (partly) really hating myself. Self hatred is complicated and enmeshed in it can be all sorts of refusals and attempts at avoiding the real issues. But leaving that aside for the time being, it is also a phase, hopefully, rather than a permanent state; an extreme reaction to discovering ugly and *extreme* facts, ones which were deliberately hidden from you in your education and your upbringing.

Middle class people who begin to see the 'realities', as it were, have reason to be angry with their families and their schools and the media, all of which lied to them. A few months ago I finally noticed that, whenever I saw my mother, within half an hour the conversation got onto either unemployment Thatcher or Ireland. I would soon be lambasting her with whatever callous posture had most recently been taken by the establishment. (My mother is reactionary about some issues, but certainly not about Ireland, being partly Irish herself — which makes it all the more ironic.)

When I lambast my mother with what about this issue and what about that and don't you know mother that like all white people you are racist? — I am talking to myself as much as to her. I hate myself for the oppressive and racist person I have

grown up as, and I hate her for making me, for letting me be, that person. She *is* partly responsible, but I am an adult and I have to take responsibility for what I am. It is within my power to change myself. Certainly by guilt-tripping her I am unlikely to change *her*.

But my main point is that in all this the temptation, once again, is to *use* the issue of Ireland (or of racism or unemployment . .) for one's own purposes, while conning oneself and possibly other people that one is being a good activist and "raising the issue of Northern Ireland wherever you are". It happens of course not just within personal relationships, me and my mother over tea in a little house in Sussex . . .

We who feel guilty and angry about what Britain, 'our' country, has been and is doing, get up on platforms and rail to our fellow countrywomen about the atrocities of the British in Ireland *partly* as a way of proving that *we* are no longer complicit in the wrongdoing. Yes, we should get up and speak to other British women, and men, but we are unlikely to say anything very useful until we have begun to work through our sense of guilt and self-hatred, and come out the other side of it.

We have to accept the fact that we were, through no choice of our own, born white, British and middle class – with all that that implies. It implies many things – for example, that we have to unlearn racism and class-attitudes and to take on board 'our' history. If we are prepared to do this, we should slowly be able to drop at least some of our guilt and self-hatred. We can perhaps then begin to feel ok about ourselves, and to see that we are not so unlike the people whose struggles we want to support. Less reason, then, to romanticise those struggles. The people engaged directly in them are not 'more human' than we are. We must believe in and support what they are doing, from a position of believing in ourselves.

With less claptrap of confused and complicated emotions in the way, we should be able to see more clearly what is going on in Northern Ireland; to refuse to romanticise or over-simplify it, and therefore when we speak out about it here, to do so with greater strength. □

1. Margaretta D'Arcy *Tell Them Everything* (Pluto Press 1981).
2. The International Women's Day Delegation is organised by the London Armagh Group, and has taken place every year since 1979. Women from all over Britain travel to Belfast the weekend closest to March 8. On the Saturday some women visit Republican women prisoners in Armagh; on the Sunday the whole delegation joins the picket outside the prison, which is organised by the Republican movement in the North.
3. Royal Ulster Constabulary, the police in Northern Ireland.

This article is a personal statement and does not represent the view of any group I have been involved in.

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SILENCED

Reviewing Makeda Silvera's 'Silenced: talks with working class West Indian women about their lives and struggles as Domestic Workers in Canada' (Williams-Wallace 1983), Marianne Collins, herself an ex-domestic worker, demands that the women's liberation movement take up this issue.

. . . We rarely hear about domestic workers and when and if we do learn about their hopes, struggles and vision it is often through the words of others. In this book we hear from the women themselves.

In all the capital cities of the so called 'Free World' there exist millions of women who are the backbone of a country but whose work goes unnoticed and unrecognised. This is even more true of black women who suffer daily the oppression of being women but also being black.

The ten West Indian women talk about their lives as domestic workers, the bittersweet memories of family back home, the frustration of never having enough money and the humiliation of being a legal slave. It is not their lack of education and lack of writing skills that have served to silence many of these women. It is rather that their silence is the result of a society which uses power and powerlessness as weapons to exclude non-white and poor people from any real decision-making and participation.

The book portrays not only the lives of the unfortunate women caught in a vicious web of racism but illustrates the issues that concern them as women and workers: sexual harassment, alienation, atrocious working and living conditions, inadequate pay and inevitably discrimination. The women who speak out in this book make it clear that domestic workers need full and complete labour rights.

One woman describes her ordeal of being raped by her employer which is enough to make any woman want to castrate any man on sight. He even managed to make that unfortunate woman feel that it was her fault, and when she reported her case to Immigration officers, the wife found out and blamed her too. The stereotyping of black women as good for nothing apart from 'sex' is very apparent in this book.

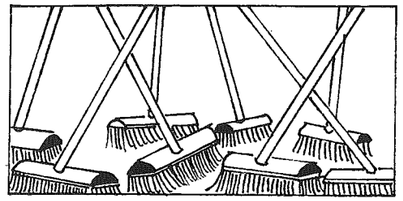
The importance of this book is that no one could dare imagine the humiliation of these women which Makeda Silvera brings to life, to touch us with its reality. Their experiences of being manipulated, degraded and suffering from extreme loneliness illustrate that obscure tunnel of life that black women travel through because of their colour.

Each page that I turn brings me back to the time when I was a domestic worker too. I left my home to come to Britain and the hopes and dreams of these women were mine too. The feelings they have given a voice to I share, as they still haunt my existence. It arose my anger more towards the society which never gives a damn about what is happening to black women.

I never expected that through my stay in England I was to become so familiar with racism. A word that until I experienced it in England I did not know existed.

Does any reader know our feelings? The feelings of feeling nothing and being nothing apart from being a devoted servant. As Primrose says, "They don't care about you, all they care about is the work be done. They don't care if you are crawling on your knees as long as your job is done."

At times I felt like a dog with the difference that the dog would be allowed to sit in the lounge with them. Loneliness was my greatest enemy and the feeling of not knowing whom I could trust. I had nothing to look forward to – at times even thinking starts to become a problem when you are constantly tired. I had no friends because I could not make friends as there is no time to go out and no money to go out with.



When I arrived I was shown to my room, which was very nice, and told to go to sleep as I was very tired. I didn't sleep at all, I stood by the window staring at the sky crying for my family. She woke me up the next day giving me all the orders to do this and do that. I had never used these electric gadgets before, and when she came back she was so angry and she started shouting and pushing me because I hadn't done any cleaning.

Anyway one day I realised that I couldn't take it anymore as she was shouting at me and calling me all the names. Previously, I didn't answer, I didn't think it was in my position as a devoted servant to answer.

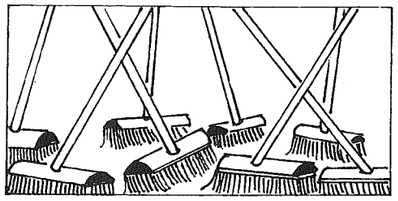
I had cried for my family and missed them to the point of suicide. I had hated myself for having been drugged by the sweet talk of foreign visitors on my shore who kept telling me that England is the 'free' land – plenty of money and everyone is nice. I walked out on my 'nice' employer. I had learned the truth the hard way but the hardest of all was to pick myself up after being humiliated for so long and to make a go of the confidence I had left.

Any woman, after reading this book, who fails to understand the daily horrors those women have encountered must either be their employers or their immigration officials. The courage of the women will inspire the readers and those readers who had previously been in a position to abuse such courageous women it will leave you only with a haunted conscience. The majority of the women are mothers and their children depend on them to be clothed, fed and schooled and because of that some are even forced to accept humiliation as part of their lives.

> I don't understand the Immigration, I don't even know why they want to keep me away from my children and husband. I want to know if when people read this book they can help to do something about this matter.

The plight of these women are real facts and therefore can be very emotional to read through because believe me, if you have any feelings towards sisterly kindness, by the time you finish the last page you will be asking yourself – is it really true?

> I came to this country with three intentions – to help my kids, to go to school, to better myself and to go to work and save some money. But now that I'm here I find that you can neither save money to go to school or send for your kids.



Makeda Silvera has performed an excellent task acting as a tongue for the silenced. I hope that this book helps to shatter this silence and encourage the women's movement to take the issue of domestic workers seriously. This book should be read by everyone and I strongly recommend it. □

"Equality is not simply giving women the right to shovel manure"

SUFFERING FROM EQUALITY

The frontispiece from the Women and Russia *almanach.*

A frequent visitor to the Soviet Union, Bridget Foster (an assumed name for visa reasons) uses two recently published books to discuss aspects not generally considered of women's lives in Russia. Apart from the burden of under-valued and unshared work, Bridget draws attention to the particular ways the Soviet Union practices racism and enforces heterosexuality and motherhood.

> "Tired after their day, they hurry home to child care centres. Bowed with the weight of grocery bags, they drag their children behind them. In a terrible crush of people, they wedge themselves into overcrowded public buses, elbowing people aside and pushing their way through to an empty seat, if there is one. At last, they reach home. Here, new cares await them: Dinner must be prepared and the husband and children must be fed. The laundry and housecleaning still awaits, because, for a working woman, there is no other time for these chores. She cannot depend on her husband for anything. The next morning, these women, with glum, blank expressions, take their children to school or child care centres and hurry to work. They perform their jobs mechanically, without inspiration, without enthusiasm."

Such is a woman's lot, described by Vera Golubeva in *Women and Russia – Feminist Writings from the Soviet Union* one of two recent books about Soviet women. In both books we come back again and again to the same basic question: why are women's lives so rotten under Soviet power? Why do women end up suffering from "equality"? Yet whilst sharing similar themes, the books are very different. *Moscow Women* is a collection of thirteen interviews conducted, as far as possible, with the "non-political", "ordinary woman on the street".

In the Soviet Union one is allowed to point out certain shortcomings in the *functioning* of the system. There are occasionally articles in the official press on family matters, morality and on the "knights of the sofa", as they call men who do not fulfill their domestic duties. It is issues such as these that mainly concern the women interviewed in *Moscow Women*. What is not allowed and what makes you a dissident, is examining and criticising the very

"Moscow Women: Thirteen Interviews" by Carola Hansson & Karin Liden, Allison & Busby, £3.95.
"Women and Russia: Feminist Writings from the Soviet Union", edited by Tatyana Mamonova, Basil Blackwell, £5.95.

Madonna and child. This illustration from "Woman Peasant" shows the official emphasis on woman as mother.

nature of Soviet society and Soviet power: it means challenging fundamental politics rather than focusing on certain inequities in how policies are executed. This is what the feminists undertake in their articles in *Women and Russia*. Despite not always being in wholehearted agreement with them, this is what, for me, makes their book so courageous and stimulating, with its remarkable mixture of analysis, poetry, theory and personal testimony.

Women and Russia is material from the first four issues of an illegal almanach (journal) for women about women which has been going since 1979. It is edited by Tatyana Mamonova, now exiled in the West. It feels very ironic and unfair that we in the West can read these pieces in a well produced (though pricey) book, when the feminists writing and producing them in the Soviet Union do so against such odds. Feminists producing the almanach have been threatened by the KGB, some have been arrested, four were forced to emigrate. It is hard too for us to imagine the hurdles that have to be overcome to produce an illegal journal, or 'samizdat'. Your typewriter can be confiscated, if you are known to be a dissident. Buying paper in any great quantity can look suspicious and attract attention. Stencils are as rare as gold dust. Photocopying is illegal. Moreover, photocopiers are mostly found at military establishments, so unauthorised people making copies can be accused of espionage. Nevertheless, the almanach continues to be published.

Racism and Colonial Attitudes

There is a stirring quality in some of the articles in *Women and Russia*. It reminds me of the exuberant years of women's liberation in Britain in the early seventies, and my own first encounters with it. "Now since the patriarchy is receding and will clearly sink into oblivion, women are breathing the fresh air of freedom, opening wide their lungs like wings and taking deep breaths", writes Ekaterina Mironova.

The editors of the almanach all share a strong commitment to democracy and to avoiding elitism in their publication. They want it to appeal to as broad a range of Soviet women as possible, and to reflect everyday, basic concerns. Consequently, the editors have broken with some religious women who were part of the original collective because of their insistence on the Russian orthodox church as the one and only true spiritual path for Soviet women. This, the editors argue, ignores the multi-national and multi-cultural nature of Soviet society, where there is also Islam, Buddhism and Judaism. The almanach is to represent "international feminism", and within their own society too.

Russian supremacy runs deep within the Soviet Union, where very colonial attitudes and practices prevail, unchallenged, amongst the European Russian population towards other races, especially the asiatic peoples of Central Asia. Anti-semitism is virulent and frighteningly acceptable; jokes are constantly launched at Jews as well as at Armenians, Uzbekis, Georgians, and anyone else who isn't Russian. Officially any problem of racism was solved in 1917 when the means of production passed into the ownership of 'the people'; which is when women officially became equal too. Because of the enormity of Russian complacency over racism, even amongst those who consider themselves 'free-thinking', it is especially encouraging that the almanach is consciously addressing itself to non-Russian women, and already has articles from Kazakhstan in Central Asia, from Armenia, and from Kamchatka at the easternmost end of Siberia.

BRIDGET FOSTER

> "I am free in my conduct
> I am my own person
> Why should I bow before you
> Like a blade of grass?"
> (from *Forty Maidens*)

Forty Maidens by O. Kurbangaeva of Kazakhstan is a fascinating piece. It tells us of a medieval epic poem about a brave woman warrior, Gulain, Turkestan's Joan of Arc, who, together with her trusted women comrades, slays a wicked foreign khan who is trying to invade their country. This epic, folk poem, O. Kurbangaeva explains, was also a form of protest against the outrages being perpetrated against women during the middle ages when "bonfires were set ablaze to burn 'disobedient' women in village squares throughout Europe". She describes the struggles Moslem women still undergo in their communities to seek an education and become independent. She tells us of the brutal murder of the first Uzbeki woman to become a teacher in 1930. She explains that in Central Asia many 'backward' men consider it shameful to be seen with their wives at the theatre or cinema, or to walk side by side with them on the street, or to have them seated at the same table with guests.

Lesbianism

Another issue over which the almanach editors had to demarcate themselves sharply from their former, religious co-workers, was that of lesbianism. Homosexuality, although not illegal for women (it is for men), is very, very hidden, and seldom referred to officially or unofficially. Lesbians who run up against the authorities can be put in mental hospitals, they can lose their children, their jobs, and generally be intimidated and hounded. It is very exciting then that the first feminist journal in the Soviet Union is actively taking up lesbian oppression and giving lesbians a unique opportunity to voice their experiences.

There is, in *Women and Russia*, a remarkably straightforward, brave and almost familiar account by a Lithuanian woman, Inessa Tominaite, of how she discovered her own lesbianism as a young woman, and her experiences since. "Books were silent on the subject, and instead, with scornfully curled lips, authors angrily slung mud . . . Imagine with what ugly associations the word *lesbian* appeared to me". Inessa did attempt to form relationships with men, but these were, understandably, unsuccessful. She is quite unequivocal about male power. "I could not relate to men even though I tried. I knew and sensed them too well. The conniving, constant sacrificing of one's self was humiliating for me. I sensed myself to be above that and stronger. A man could not be my ideal. I could not sense my own unworthiness next to him".

Inessa describes her lesbian relationships,

firstly with a teacher who runs away to Moscow, then with L.; a difficult relationship but one which endures five years "without fights or scandals". A relationship Inessa subsequently has with an actress ends abruptly when the actress withdraws out of the "universal fear of publicity", as Inessa puts it. Lesbianism is very definitely in the closet in the Soviet Union; even in Lithuania, considered very much one of the more westernised and 'freer' republics. Inessa explains that there are open lesbians, but very few, and they must be women who already have nothing more to lose. "There do exist, of course, those who are 'unmasked'. They openly dress as boys. They even flaunt their orientation. Basically, those were part of the so-called nonworking".

Inessa is very critical of the way so many lesbian relationships are conducted. She hates the fact that she is so complimented by women for her apparent 'masculinity' — for her "male character, male self-assurance, and male fickleness". She talks of the lack of models for Soviet lesbians and their difficulties in creating them. She talks of women remaining together in lesbian relationships that "have long outlived themselves" only out of fear of remaining alone. Yet Inessa is inspiringly sure and determined about affirming her lesbianism, whatever the odds. "Why should I go against my nature? . . . For me, what has become the norm for others is unnatural. I am speaking only of the right to be myself, to not have to submit to the punishment of a people who have an unacceptable culture." What is so important for me about Inessa's piece, and what makes it feel like a rush of fresh air within the whole selection, is its implicit understanding of compulsory heterosexuality. As a lesbian, Inessa knows she is challenging the institution of heterosexuality upon which the very functioning of the Soviet system is based. No wonder lesbians are, she says, considered de facto to be dissidents, and are harassed and repressed accordingly. Most women in the Soviet Union work so hard, and have such little outlet for their own feelings, desires, creativity; lesbianism is a dangerous and heretical notion that must be suppressed as much as possible.

Equality Soviet style

"It seems to me that our women suffer from equality", says Liza, interviewed in *Moscow Women*, "Equality consists of the women carrying the heaviest burden". Similar echoes and themes reverberate throughout the interviews. Women seem to live on the run, circling and circling round the constant treadmill of getting to and from work, feeding families, getting children to and from nursery or school, doing household shopping and chores (with few labour-saving devices, no convenience foods and long queues and nothing much worth buying in the shops).

The Soviet state has always needed women's labour to build its industrial economy. However, at the time of the revolution, in 1917, women's participation in waged work was seen not only as expedient to the country's industrial development, but also as a means to women's liberation. Women were to find economic independence and equal status with men through their involvement in the work force. Feminists at the time, such as Alexandra Kollontai, saw paid work outside the home as very progressive for women. But, crucially, she and other feminists believed that other whole areas of women's lives must be revolutionised as well, for this to lead to women's liberation, rather than super-exploitation. Most importantly, the state was to take on the bulk of women's traditional domestic work. The individual family was to be abandoned as society took on the domestic labour that women had always performed for free in maintaining a healthy work force. Women were to be set free. Women were to discover themselves, their sexuality (no mention of lesbianism, unfortunately), and their sense of collectivity, free from the oppressive bonds of marriage.

Needless to say, such feminist notions deeply alarmed male revolutionaries at the time. Women's departments set up, with difficulty, at the time of the revolution were, predictably, some of the first sacrifices to the economic hardship felt by the young state. The family was not de-privatised; nor was domestic labour undertaken by the state.

The two sides of women's work. Women selling and buying at a market in Kiev.

BRIDGET FOSTER

The Soviet state now rests its case for women's equality on the sheer, crude fact that women make up half the work force. In this way, the state obtains women's labour, industrially and domestically, and yet also claims to have solved the 'women's question'.

Even within the very workforce that is meant to have brought them equality, women experience discrimination. Women mostly work in service and light industry. They make up the bulk of the low paid, and are not always paid the same wage as a man for doing the same job. When women predominate in a profession, it can lose its prestige — like medicine, or teaching. A job, at the same time, is not seen as so important to a woman, because she has her family, and this attitude has been internalised by many women. If a woman does set her sights on a career, though, often her promotion prospects are then reduced by the fact that she is a woman: "a professional woman is treated scornfully in many cases. Despite high prestige as a scientist and publications, a woman senses a constant put-down. If I were a man, I would have been given higher-paying positions", writes an angry 'career woman' in *Women and Russia*. Men are mostly favoured for positions of leadership and responsibility (note the Politburo), and this trend is apparently increasing.

Social control

So why do Soviet women not recognise their 'equality' for the sham it is? The feminists in *Women and Russia* return to this question again and again, and it is interesting how they approach answering it, given both the quite different propaganda machinery with which they live, and the absence of any popular psychology movement in their society. Freud has never been an influence on Soviet psychological thinking. I have always met with great hilarity amongst Soviet women when I've tried to explain penis envy or the Oedipal complex and the monumental effect these have had on western thinking! There is no notion of counselling or therapy as having any part of 'normal' life. The absence of pop-psychology is, I think , quite significant then. It means Soviet people do not think so much in terms of an 'unconscious', of hidden motives, or of childhood experiences being critically important. I have found discussing personal relationships quite problematic with Soviet friends, because there simply does not seem to be the emotional vocabulary I am used to in English. Yet at the same time, I have found the lack of pop-psychology often very freeing and refreshing, and it can sometimes help unmask methods of social control in a very clear way, for less emphasis is put on the individual.

BRIDGET FOSTER

A newly married couple leave wedding flowers as a tribute on the Cruiser "Aurora", whose blank shot signalled the revolution in 1917. The irony is that the revolution was to have freed women from marriage for ever!

Ekaterina Alexandrova certainly introduces us to some stark facts around social control and the family in her article on marriage in *Women and Russia*. She tries to explain why women put up with marriage and how they are more or less compelled to get married by the state (though the divorce rate is high). People's personal lives are very monitored in the Soviet Union, on the basis that each person's 'morality' is crucial to the collective. One is very aware, Ekaterina writes, of how much one's conformity is being watched. Within this it is unacceptable not to marry.

A soviet citizen has to process a phenonmenal number of bureaucratic forms, records, official papers, on all of which it is stated whether or not she is married. For example, each Soviet citizen has a standard reference card which is used very often, not only when changing jobs. This card contains character references, using standard wording. A normal, positive card would have "politically mature, morally stable" written on it. However, because marriage is regarded officially as the only 'moral' way of life, an unmarried person is automatically suspect. If the standard wording is then not used, the implications are grave. 'Normal' life for this person would be finished", explains Ekaterina, "He or she would become a third class citizen there and then, . . . a person whose opportunities have suddenly been drastically curtailed".

It is very significant however that despite showing this intense interest in maintaining and controlling the family, the Soviet state at the same time deliberately denigrates home life. It is often portrayed as something beneath political discussion, as something petty and even contemptible compared to the major and noble task of building communism. This downgrades and ignores women's contribution to society in the relentless, unpaid domestic work that she does. Importantly, *it also leaves her without any framework in which to formulate and articulate her criticisms*. "In the course of several years the idea has been instilled in people that the only 'real' life, the only life worthy of a human being, is a life dedicated to the task of building a new society", writes Alla Sariban in *Women and Russia*. "To work on this great construction project, to launch rockets – that is what life is really all about. Day to day living, the house, cooking – all these concerns are petit bourgeois. A person is valued in society only as a producer. One's private life, everyday lives, marital relations, and the like are considered lowly and shameful, like defecation".

The propaganda trap

Television, radio and posters all proclaim the *public* world of Party, labour and socialist construction. Yet, nevertheless, Soviet women seem to go on identifying with the system. They complain to one another about the difficulties they experience, and even criticise the system. But they do not *reject* the system. But why? When it ignores women's basic concerns. Alla's answer contains the full irony of women's situation. Women go on supporting the system because they have to be able to make some sense of their suffering, there has to be some goal, some meaning to it, otherwise they may go mad. Soviet propaganda then provides women with an 'ideal' to strive towards, amidst their "earthbound, banal, and grey" lives.

The way in which the Soviet state finally guarantees more or less complete loyalty from its people is by engendering a constant, real fear of war and external attack. Internally, the Soviet Union is portrayed as a benevolent, peace-loving force, protecting its people from the ever-increasing threat of nuclear war. In a devastingly simple way the Soviet state creates acceptance of hardship as the price for this protection. Indeed, women become thankful for what they have got, because next to war – and memories of the devastation of the last war are kept very much alive – their lives are "sweet, 'prosperous' and good". One is distracted from personal 'minor' difficulties and concerns. The inner tension that is generated by the stress of constant frustrations and through the drudgery of daily life is re-directed into fear of attack, and, perhaps more ominously into aggression against a potential enemy. This is also true of the West, where fears of a nuclear war can leave us paralysed and unable to continue fighting as women on other issues which affect us gravely all the time. The cold war serves both sides.

Femininity

I did have bouts of uneasiness, turning at points to dismay about the way a large number of the contributors see motherhood as the *crux* of our identity and peak of fulfillment as women. For example, "Women give society its very life", write the editors, "and in them duty and personal interest coincide (the revolutionaries' dream). Living for others, women in motherhood are naturally living for themselves as well. In the process of creating their own happiness, they are not acting contrary to the interests of others". Whilst feeling quite alienated by this, as a childless woman, and wondering what it might be like for an infertile woman in the Soviet Union, I also felt concerned about the implicit emphasis on *biological* differences.

There are common notions in the Soviet Union on the particular qualities a woman has – her 'femininity' – which are usually seen as inseparable from her also being a mother. "When you get down to it, a woman is always a woman", argues Elena Stepanova in *Moscow Women*, "Her maternal instincts are a determining factor". The Soviet feminists writing in *Women and Russia* have not broken completely with this belief in 'natural' attributes. Ideas of 'femininity' are deeply rooted in the Soviet Union. Unfortunately they serve an important function in arresting the potential growth and power of women, that might have been gained through their role in the work force, and in non-traditional jobs. 'Femininity' then is part of a patriarchal nostalgia for the 'real woman', ie one that is pliant and concerned with male approval. This nostalgia is felt in *Moscow Women* where Elena Stepanova talks of the terrible responsibility women took on during and after the last war. "What was most damaged was women's innermost being . . . Of course, women got a lot out of their enforced independence because they were alone to make important decisions. But they became more masculine, more decisive, even more like men psychologically".

An underlying belief in 'natural' attributes makes a far-reaching critique of heterosexuality impossible, and also, lets men off the hook. Although there are knocks at "Soviet phallocrats" and references to men's brutality, irresponsibility and drunkenness, the Soviet feminists do seem less concerned with male power itself than with the male-dominated Soviet state. It does feel at times as though it is the state alone that reaps the benefit from women's exploitation, not men, individually and collectively. There is also quite a lot of talk in the book about feminism as humanism. "Practical humanism finds its brightest expression in the WLM", say the editors. What then of patriarchy and the very real struggle with male power that has to be waged before we can speak of a common humanity?

I am fearful of the Soviet WLM being based on the 'moral' superiority of women. That's what also alarms me about aspects of the women's peace movement in the West. Although I know that as women we are morally superior, I know that that's born of powerlessness not biology. What we are after must be power, not moral rewards. I look forward with the very greatest interest to how these debates will evolve within the Soviet WLM. I salute the extraordinary courage of Soviet feminists in speaking out. And I recommend *Women and Russia* as a fascinating and moving read. □

JUDY STEVENS

This paper is part of a thesis on ideas about gender in the 18th century. Most of the material is in the British Museum Library for which you need a reader's ticket. This is free but you have to provide references. Jonathan Katz *Gay American History* has a section on passing women and Lillian Faderman *Surpassing the Love of Men* is full of interesting material, whether or not you agree with her interpretations. Both books are in paperback and are stocked by *Gays the Word* in London. A translation of the 1721 trial of Linck and Muhlhahn appears in the *Journal of Homosexuality* Volume 6, 1980/1981 which any library should be able to order. Gina Luria *The Feminist Controversy in England 1788–1810* is a collection of reprints. Extracts from a lot of early women writers can be found in Dale Spender *Women of Ideas (and what men have done to them)* which is also in paperback. It is depressing to see how the most radical writings have been supressed and all we ever hear about is Mary Wollstonecraft. The 18th century is becoming more 'fashionable' among academics now and if enough pressure is put on libraries and publishers, many of these early feminists may be reprinted in paperback so that we all get a chance to read them. In the meantime, I would welcome any criticism of my work from other women.

WOMEN WHO DRESSED AS MEN

For Pat

Women were imprisoned, even executed, for wearing men's clothing in the 18th century. Lynne Friedli suggests that it was not their sexuality that was at issue but the challenge they posed to the image of woman as dutiful wife and mother.

Passing women is the name given to women who lived and dressed, worked and often married, disguised as men. It is probably true that women have passed as men throughout history in cultures where clothing defined your class and gender. The word transvestite originally meant a woman who wore men's clothes. During the late 17th and 18th centuries however, such women attracted a lot of attention – in the press, in ballads, anecdotes, the theatre and finally, in the emerging medical profession. It is impossible to know whether the publicity given to passing women reflected an increase in their numbers, nor do we know how many women passed successfully without being discovered.

One of the things I want to argue is that this interest in passing women is mainly related to a general concern about the position of women, and the need to define the boundaries of male and female roles in a society that was in the process of radical change. In Europe, the 18th century marks the beginning of a shift from a rural to an urban society, the beginnings of capitalist economy as we know it, a time of colonial expansion and imperialist propaganda, a time of the birth of institutions that still control our lives – hospitals, schools, prisons, asylums, and charity (usually called philanthropy). The need for labour, the need for every individual to contribute to the 'general good' of society was at the heart of a number of debates that deeply affected women, particularly in relation to children. It is against this background of changes, and their different effects on women of all classes, that I have tried to analyse the lives of passing women.

Men also cross-dressed: in London there were Molly clubs where men met and took part in 'feminine' rituals, including simulated labour and childbirth. These were often meeting places for homosexual men[1] and they became the focus of homophobic or anti-homosexual attacks. Cross-dressing for men was thus part of a social activity – but for passing women it was a total change of sexual identity.

There seem to have been three main categories of passing women. The 'eccentric personality' (usually upper class) sometimes an actress – whose class or profession pro-

1. The term homosexual was not current until the end of the 19th century, but men who slept together were called sodomites and were seen as an identifiable group to a certain extent. Hence the term 'Molly', which originally meant prostitute, came to mean sodomite or effeminate during the 18th century. That effeminacy and sodomy were seen as linked may be partly to do with cross-dressing etc at the Molly clubs, but also because sodomy was seen as decadent, and *images* of decadence, luxury, corruption etc, are invariably female in this period.

tected her from prosecution; women who enlisted as soldiers or sailors and on discovery, invariably received an honourable discharge; and lower class women who lived, worked and often married as men, and if discovered were variously punished by imprisonment and whipping or pillory.
I shall discuss three women in detail: Charlotte Charke, an actress, Mary Hamilton, a quack doctor and Deborah Sampson, a soldier.

Charlotte Charke

A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke, written by herself is the most wonderful and humorous autobiography, in spite of its tragic ending. It was written in 1755, republished in 1929 and is now, typically, out of print. Charlotte Charke worked as a strolling actress playing men's parts, as a grocer, a clerk, a pastry cook, a hog merchant, a publican, a gardener, a man-servant and finally as a writer. Often, when her sex was discovered she lost her job, but her role as an actress seems to have protected her from prosecution. She defends 'wearing breeches' by saying it is due to a secret which concerns no one but herself. One of the most interesting things about her story is that she not only explores roles usually exclusive to men, but in doing so, mocks the great mystery attached to them – as when she sets up as a doctor:

> "I was indeed of the opinion that a few physical hard words would be necessary to establish my reputation; and accordingly had recourse to a Latin Dictionary and soon gathered up as many fragments as served to confound their senses and bring 'em into a high opinion of my skill in the medicinal science."

Her writing shows that she rebelled against the restrictions of a female role from an early age – "My natural propensity to a Hat and a Wig, in which at the age of four years, I made a very considerable figure". She married "before I had more distinguishing sense than a kitten", but on the birth of her daughter a year later, left her husband due to his "unconquerable fondness for variety". Different expectations about the roles of fathers and mothers are shown when her daughter is ill and she shouts into the street for help:

> "The people's compassion was moved 'tis true, but as I happened not to be known to them, it drew them into astonishment to see the figure of a young gentleman so extravagantly grieved for the loss of a child."

When her daughter marries, or rather "enslaves herself for life to an inconsiderable fool", Charlotte writes at length about the contradictions of the duty of obedience to a husband. Charlotte Charke's own companion, Mrs Brown, is a silent, shadowy figure in the story who shares the hardship of their lives without complaint.

Charlotte is not unusual in her rejection of the constraints of the feminine role – what is unusual is her determination to live as a man in spite of repeated obstacles and difficulties. She ended up poverty stricken in a hovel in Islington, where she wrote her autobiography in an attempt to keep herself from starving. She received 10 pounds for the manuscript.

Charlotte Charke's story is quite different from those actresses, like Nell Gwyn and Peg Woffington, who achieved great fame playing men's parts. Women were only allowed on stage after 1660 and a great vogue for women in men's parts developed. The audiences were mainly male and the whole point was, as in drag performances today, that everyone knew it was really a woman. Women in breeches on stage could also be sexually titillating rather than challenging: "That excellent Peg, who showed such a Leg, when lately she dressed in men's clothes . . . .".

Mary Hamilton

Mary Hamilton was convicted in Taunton, Somerset in 1746 for posing as a man and marrying one Mary Price. A local newspaper said "She seems very gay and impudent, with Perriwig, Ruffles and Breeches, and it is publicly talked that she has deceived several of the fair sex by marrying them."

She left home at 14, dressed in her brother's clothes, and having served an apprenticeship, set up as a quack doctor under the title Dr Charles Hamilton. In this disguise she courted and wed Mary Price. Three months after the marriage, Mary Price took her to court. Mary Price told the court that she had never suspected that her husband was a woman until some discussion with her mother had raised doubts. The court records say:

> "after their marriage they lay together several nights and that the said pretended Charles Hamilton who had married her aforesaid entered her body several times, which made this woman believe at first that the said Hamilton was a real man."

In almost all of these cases the 'wife' states that she was unaware of the true sex of her 'husband'. Obviously it was in the wife's interest to prove her own innocence to the courts. Mary Hamilton was convicted of fraud, imprisoned, publicly whipped in four market towns and later released.

In a similar case in Germany in 1721, the 'husband' was executed while the 'wife' was tortured, imprisoned and later banished. In her testimony the 'husband' said "that while she was a soldier she had hired many a woman whom she excited with the leather object. At times she ran for miles after a beautiful woman and spent all her earnings on her. Often when a woman touched her, even slightly, she became so full of passion that she did not know what to do." These court records are a vital piece of lesbian history and also show that contrary to some feminists' claims, the use of dildoes is not confined to lesbians in male pornography.

Deborah Sampson

Deborah Sampson was an American woman who enlisted to fight in the American War of Independence from Britain. Her story, *The Female Review: or Memoirs of an American Young Lady*, was written by someone called Herman Mann in 1797. Because the story includes "quotes" from Deborah Sampson, there are some interesting contradictions. On the one hand she describes a woman's life as "a prison where I must drag out the remainder of my existence in ignorance", while the author uses her as an example to the rest of her sex:

> "Thus, Females, whilst you see the avidity of a maid in her teens confronting the dangers and made a veteran example in war, you need only half the diligence in your proper, domestic sphere, to render your charms completely irresistible."

As in other cases, Miss Sampson's sex was discovered when she was wounded in battle and she received an honourable discharge. However, she remained in men's clothes, working on a farm, and a large section of the story is devoted to the author's justification of her relationships with other women:

> "But her correspondence with her sister sex! – Surely it must have been that of sentiment, taste and purity, as animal love on her part was out of the question."

He goes on to say, "I cannot learn that she has the least wish to usurp the prerogatives of our sex". Eventually she marries a man and he concludes, "it is hearsay that Mrs Gannett refuses her husband the rites of the marriage bed".

Deception and Fraud

Women who dressed as men had, above all, access to jobs that were limited to males. They enjoyed more freedom of mobility, less fear of sexual attacks, better employment prospects, with better pay. They were also free to have sexual relationships with other women or to avoid sex with men.

The women who were prosecuted were invariably those who married or tried to, and and they were charged with fraud, ie pretending to be men and exercising male rights. By contrast, men who were convicted of homosexual practices were charged with sodomy – a specifically sexual offence. During the 18th century in England, the number of convictions for sodomy and the severity of the penalties rose considerably, as did attacks on 'effeminate' men. Men suspected of being 'Mollies' were mobbed in the streets of London.

We need to ask, therefore, why passing women were never subjected to a similar degree of popular and legal harrassment. One possibility is that the family unit depends on male authority in legal terms, so that deviance by *men* must be punished by society, while individual husbands and fathers are responsible for punishing wives and daughters. Hence the law's disregard of domestic violence against women. In terms of public opinion, women soldiers formed by far the most common and most publicised of the recorded incidents of cross dressing. The high status of qualities associated with a military career gave women who showed them an increased value as 'honorary men'. The adoption of masculinity in *clearly defined circumstances* confirms the value of being male. The

'effeminate' man cannot enjoy the same status because to be female is to be despised.

Charging passing women with fraud meant that what was at issue was deception. The whole idea of deception, which was considered a problem in the areas of religion and medicine as well, took on a special meaning in relation to women, because they were considered to be more easily deceived and gullible. This view had its roots in ideas about women's bodies as more fluid, sensitive etc. But also, women were more capable of deception – which they used mainly in relation to their appearance – to increase their sexual attractiveness.

What was important to the courts was not women's *sexual practices*, but their adoption of a male disguise. Far more attention was given to prostitution, which was seen to threaten the family directly – by discouraging marriage, by infecting husbands who then infected their wives and children too. Women soldiers achieved heroic status as exceptional women, the way a woman astronaut might today, without providing any fundamental challenge to male privileges. Far more threatening were ordinary women who abandoned their feminine roles. A series of laws concerned with forgery, impersonation, fraud and copyright, (either new laws or calls for severer penalties) suggest a general fear about deception and disorder. The prosecution of passing women for fraud is clearly part of this process.

Motherhood, control and sexuality

It seems to me however, that the enforcement of rigid and recognisable divisions between men and women was largely carried out through policies aimed at the family. Motherhood as a primary identity for women was so firmly established that it became difficult to discuss women at all, except in relation to their childbearing abilities. And these abilities provided the key area where the medical profession, the law, educational, charitable and religious authorities could intervene in women's lives. By the early 19th century, domesticity was seen as essential to women's physical and mental health.

In the enormous growth of advice literature on the family, there was on the one hand a criticism of the lower class: women who abandon illegitimate children, spread disease as prostitutes, practice infanticide etc, and on the other hand, a criticism of decadent aristocratic women for vanity, in refusing to breast feed, sexual intrigue, failure to bring up their children themselves, devoting time to useless accomplishments. Through a range of images in art, literature, medical texts, advice tracts and legislative reform, whatever was thought to interfere with adequate mothering, from arranged marriage to apprenticeship practices, was called into question. Of course, the idea of the chaste wife, caring for her children at home, could only ever be a fiction for the majority of women. What was significant was the *power* this image achieved.

The emphasis on women as mothers was not just part of legal medical and philanthropic literature, it also became the mainstay of the feminist debate.

Whereas earlier feminists in the 17th century had seen *marriage* as the problem, and argued for celibacy, women like Mary Wollstonecraft argued for an improvement in women's position *because* they were mothers. The ideology of the love marriage was very attractive to middle class women because it implied a freedom of choice, but lower class women already had that freedom. Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1754 may have protected heiresses and their male relations, but it also outlawed popular marriage customs and meant that the unions of many lower class women were no longer valid before the law.

In much of the feminist literature, the problems of sexual expression for women were covered over by the emphasis on the duties, rewards and responsibilities of motherhood. But on the whole, women were neither seen, nor saw themselves, as not sexual.

In the 18th century, the 'excess' of women's sexuality is discussed in every debate from prostitution to midwifery, from popular sex manuals to penny pamphlets, as well as featuring in women's own writings. It was well known that the clitoris was essential to women's pleasure – hence the interest in the size of it in passing women. It was believed that the practice of clitoridectomy in Ethiopia was carried out precisely to curb women's sexuality, as well as to prevent self abuse and tribadism.

I emphasise all this because a number of studies, notably Lillian Faderman's book, seem to suggest that men have been rampantly sexual throughout history, and women have not. She makes generalisations from studies of 'romantic friendships' – a convention that only ever applied to a small number of upper class women – and even extends this to the present day saying:

> "women who identify themselves as lesbians generally do not view lesbianism as a sexual phenomenon first and foremost."

This is certainly not my own experience and seems to be part of the feminism that says women have some sort of innocent sexuality.

Around the middle of the 18th century, there was a big debate in medical circles about hermaphrodites, or people who were not clearly one sex or the other, or had the characteristics of both. Up until then, midwives were responsible for determining the sex of the child (significantly this was also the period of the struggle between midwives and medical men, which in the end the midwives lost).

The interest in hermaphrodites was part of a general 'scientific' concern about the abnormal, and can be seen as a need to define very precisely exactly what was *'normal'*. In popular culture, the strange and monstrous was associated with prophecy, the spiritual – a sign or an omen. What rational science did was to place such things 'under the microscope', robbing them of all so called superstitious associations. The most popular metaphor for science in this period was Light – which is also a symbol of interrogation.

The debate about hermaphrodites is connected with passing women because of attempts to find *physical* explanations for abnormal behaviour. In France, a number of women who dressed as men were discovered by priests during confession. In these cases they were sent to the Paris Medical Faculty, where they were examined to discover their sex and in most cases, ordered to re-adopt female dress. In 1750, Michel-Anne Drouart was discovered to be an hermaphrodite and exhibited to the medical profession in London.

In spite of this, the dominant opinion in England was that hermaphrodites did not exist, but were simply women with large clitorises. We can see how the medical profession was taking over from the Church in respect of deviant behaviour – and trying to find explanations, firstly in the body, but later in the mind.

This transition is clear in *The True Adventures of Catherine Vizzani* (1755), written in Italian and translated by an English doctor. He describes how Catherine was shot and killed while trying to run away with her lover, the niece of a minister. She was dissected, but as her genitals were normal, if anything smaller than usual, he concludes:

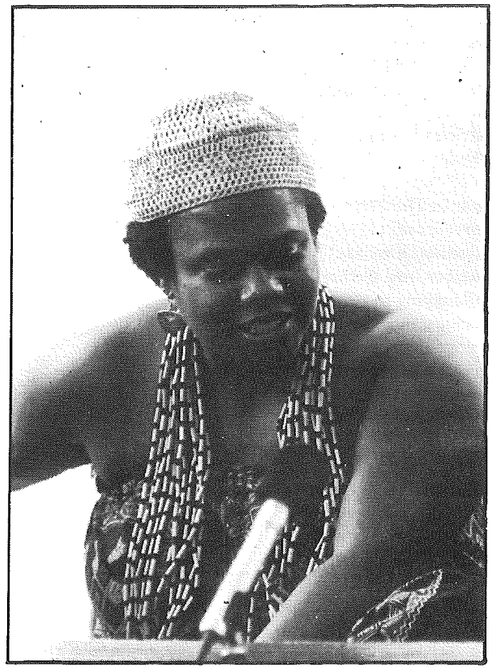
> "It seems most likely therefore that this unfortunate and scandalous creature had her imagination corrupted early in her youth, either by obscene tales or by privately listening to the discourses of women".

As yet, very little research has been done on passing women. A complete search of all court records and all newspapers of the period would be necessary to get even a partially complete picture of the extent of this practice.

Women who dressed as men implicitly rejected the role of mother, in a period when both feminists and anti-feminists were defining women only in relation to the family. The fact that passing women either did not mention or glossed over sexual encounters with other women does not, of course, prove anything about their sexuality one way or the other. While some women (usually middle or upper class) denied their sexual feelings, this was generally a *political* strategy, a form of protest against the treatment of women. It cannot be used to make generalisations about all women, anymore than political lesbianism can be used to make statements about all lesbians today.

It is finally, perhaps, a mark of the strength of the ideology of motherhood, that women continued and continue to fight for their rights beneath its banner, and the state never needed to use specific laws to make lesbianism illegal. It is perhaps also why lesbian mothers have been the focus of some of the most punitive anti-lesbian attacks – from both the legal system and the general public. □

Bibliography:
Charlotte Charke *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Charlotte Charke written by herself* (1755 and 1929) from libraries.
Henry Fielding *The Female Husband* (1746 and 1960) is a sixpenny pamphlet based on the trial of Mary Hamilton. Its purpose is to titillate but it makes good reading and shows that Fielding thought his readers would be very familiar with such stories. Also available from libraries.
Another piece of early pornography (it was becoming popular in this period) where the heroine is seduced by a woman is John Cleland *Fanny Hill Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749 and 1964).
Herman Mann *The Female Review: or, Memoirs of an American Young Lady by a citizen of Massachussetts, Dedham* (1797 and 1974). This is available on microfilm and can be ordered by libraries with this facility.
G.P.S. Bianchi *An Historical and Physical Dissertation on the case of Catherine Vizzani* 1751. This is in the British Library but there may be copies elsewhere.



coalition politics:

turning the century

This inspiring speech is reprinted from the American Black feminist anthology 'Home Girls' because we feel it addresses issues crucial to the future of the movement. Given the deadly seriousness of the divisions amongst us, how can we hope to achieve the changes we need for the survival of us all? Berenice Johnson Reagon urges that we must expect struggle amongst ourselves as soon as we move out towards effective large-scale political action, but that the pain of making changes should not lead us into cynicism or despair.

I've never been this high before. I'm talking about the altitude. There is a lesson in bringing people together where they can't get enough oxygen, then having them try to figure out what they're going to do when they can't think properly. I'm serious about that. There probably are some people here who can breathe, because you were born in high altitudes and you have big lung cavities. But when you bring people in who have not had the environmental conditioning, you got one group of people who are in a strain — and the group of people who are feeling fine are trying to figure out why you're staggering around, and that's what this workshop is about this morning.

I wish there had been another way to graphically make me feel it because I belong to the group of people who are having a very difficult time being here. I feel as if I'm gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you're *really* doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing.

I'm Bernice Reagon. I was born in Georgia, and I'd like to talk about the fact that in about twenty years we'll turn up another century. I believe that we are positioned to have the opportunity to have something to do with what makes it into the next century. And the principles of coalition are directly related to that. You don't go into coalition because you just *like* it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive.

A hundred years ago in this country we were just beginning to heat up for the century we're in. And the name of the game in terms of the dominant energy was technology. We have lived through a period where there have been things like railroads and telephones, and radios, TV's and airplanes, and cars, and transistors, and computers. And what this has done to the concept of human society and human life is, to a large extent, what we in the latter part of this century have been trying to grapple with. With the coming of all that technology, there was finally the possibility of making sure no human being in the world would be unreached. You couldn't find a place where you could hide if somebody who had access to that technology wanted to get to you. Before the dawning of that age you had all these little cute villages and the wonderful homogenous societies where everybody looked the same, and believed the same things, and if they didn't, you could just kill them and nobody would even ask you about it.

We've pretty much come to the end of a time when you can have a space that is 'yours only' — just for the people you want to be there. Even when we have our 'women-only' festivals, there is no such thing. The fault is not necessarily with the organisers of the gathering. To a large extent it's because we have just finished with that kind of isolating. There is no hiding place. There is nowhere you can go and only be with people who are like you. It's over. Give it up.

Now every once in awhile there is a need for people to try to clean out corners and bar the doors and check everybody who comes in the door, and check what they carry in and say, "Humph, inside this place the only thing we are going to deal with is X or Y or Z." And so only the X's or Y's or Z's get to come in. That place can then become a nurturing place or a very destructive place. Most of the time when people do that, they do it because of the heat of trying to live in this society where being an X or Y or Z is very difficult, to say the least. The people running the society call the shots as if they're still living in one of those little villages, where they kill the ones they don't like or put them in the forest to die. (There are some societies where babies are born and if they are not wanted for some reason they are put over in a corner. They do that here too, you know, put them in garbage cans.) When somebody else is running a society like that, and you are the one who would be put out to die, it gets too hard to stay out in that society all the time. And that's when you find a place, and you try to bar the door and check all the people who come in. You come together to see what you can do about shouldering up all of your energies so that you and your kind can survive.

There is no chance you can survive by staying *inside* the barred room. That will not be tolerated. The door of the room will just be painted red and then when those who call the shots get ready to clean house, they have easy access to you.

But that space while it lasts should be a nurturing space where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are. And you take the time to construct within yourself and within your community who you would be if you were running society. In fact, in that little barred room where you check everybody at the door, you act out community. You pretend that your room is a world. It's almost like a play, and in some cases you actually grow food, you learn to have clean water, and all of that stuff, you just try to do it all. It's like, "If *I* was really running it, this is the way it would be."

Of course the problem with the experiment is that there ain't nobody in there but folk like you, which by implication means you wouldn't know what to do if you were running it with all of the other people who are out there in the world. Now that's nationalism. I mean it's nurturing, but it is also nationalism. At a certain stage nationalism is crucial to a people if you are going to ever impact as a group in your own interest. Nationalism at another point becomes reactionary because it is totally inadequate for surviving in the world with many peoples.

Sometimes you get comfortable in your little barred room, and you decide you in fact

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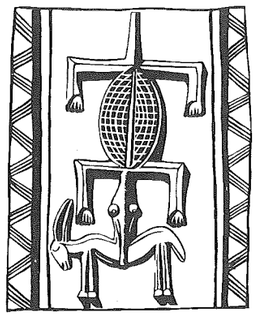

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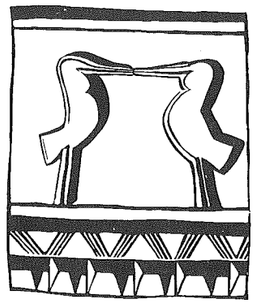
JUDY STEVENS



are going to live there and carry out all of your stuff in there. And you gonna take care of everything that needs to be taken care of in the barred room. If you're white and in the barred room and if everybody's white, one of the first things you try to take care of is making sure that people don't think that the barred room is a racist barred room. So you begin to talk about racism and the first thing you do is say, "Well, maybe we better open the door and let some Black folks in the barred room." Then you think, "Well, how we gonna figure out whether they're X's or not?" Because there's nothing in the room but X's. You go down the checklist. You been working a while to sort out who you are, right? So you go down the checklist and say, "If we can find Black folk like that we'll let them in the room." You don't really want Black folks, you are just looking for yourself with a little colour to it.

And there are those of us Black folk who are like that. So if you're lucky you can open the door and get one or two. Right? And everything's wonderful. But no matter what, there will be one or two of us who have not bothered to be like you and you know it. We come knocking on your door and say, "Well, you let them in, you let me in too." And we will break your door down in trying to get in. As far as we can see we are also X's. Cause you didn't say, "THIS BARRED ROOM IS FOR WHITE X'S ONLY." You just said it was for X's. So everybody who thinks they're an X comes running to get into the room. And because you trying to take care of everything in this room, and you know you're not racist, you get pressed to let us all in.

The first thing that happens is that the room don't feel like the room anymore. And it ain't home no more. It is not a womb no more. And you can't feel comfortable no more. And what happens at that point has to do with trying to do too much in it. You don't do no coalition building in a womb. It's just like trying to get a baby used to taking a drink when they're in your womb. It just don't work too well. Inside the womb you generally are very soft and unshelled. You have no covering. And you have no ability to handle what happens if you start to let folks in who are not like you.

Coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn't look for comfort. Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They're not looking for a coalition; they're looking for a home! They're looking for a bottle with some milk in it and a nipple, which does not happen in a coalition. You don't get a lot of food in a coalition. You don't get fed a lot in a coalition. In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can't stay there all the time. You go to the coalition for a few hours and then you go back and take your bottle wherever it is, and then you go back and coalesce some more.

It is very important not to confuse them — home and coalition. Now when it comes to women — the organised women's movement — this recent thrust — we all have had the opportunity to have some kind of relationship with it. The women's movement has perpetuated a myth that there is some common experience that comes just cause you're women. And they're throwing all these festivals and this music and these concerts happen. If you're the same kind of women like the folk in that little barred room, it works. But as soon as some other folk check the definition of 'women' that's in the dictionary (which you didn't write, right?) they decide that they can come because they are women, but when they do they don't see or hear nothing that is like them. Then they charge, "This ain't no women's thing!" Then if you try to address that and bring them in, they start to play music that ain't even women's music! And you try to figure out what happened to your wonderful barred room. It comes from taking a word like 'women' and using it as a code. There is an in-house definition so that when you say 'women-only' most of the time that means you had better be able — if you come to this place — to handle lesbianism and a lot of folks running around with no clothes on. And I'm being too harsh this morning as I talk to you, but I don't want you to miss what I'm trying to say. Now if you come and you can't handle that, there's another term that's called 'woman-identified'. They say you might be a woman but you're not woman-identified, and we only want women who are 'woman-identified'. That's a good way to leave a lot of women out of your room.

So here you are and you grew up and you speak English and you know about this word 'woman' and you know you one, and you walk into this 'woman-only' space and you ain't there. Because 'woman' in that space does not mean 'woman' from your world. It's a code word and it traps, and the people that use the word are not prepared to deal with the fact that if you put it out, everybody that thinks they're a woman may one day want to seek refuge. And it ain't no refuge place! And it's not safe! It should be a coalition! It may have been that in its first year the Michigan National "Women-Only" festival was a refuge place. By the fourth year it was a place of coalition, and it's not safe anymore. It ain't safe for nobody who comes. When you walk in there you in trouble — and everybody who comes is trying to get to their home there. At this festival (Yosemite) they said: whatever you drink, bring it with you — tea, honey, you know, whatever it is — and we will provide hot water. Now I understand that you got here and there was no hot water. Can't get nothing! That is the nature of coalition. You have to give it all. It is not to feed you; you have to feed it. And it's a monster. It never gets enough. It always wants more. So you better be sure you got your home someplace for you to go to so that you will not become a martyr to the coalition. Coalition *can* kill people; however, it is not by nature fatal. You do not have to die because you are committed to coalition. I'm not so old, and I don't know nothing else. But you do have to know how to pull back, and you do have to have an old-age perspective. You have to be beyond the womb stage.

None of this matters at all very much if you die tomorrow — that won't even be cute. It only matters if you make a commitment to be around for another fifty more years. There are some grey haired women I see running around occasionally, and we have to talk to those folks about how come they didn't commit suicide forty years ago. Don't take everything they say because some of the stuff they gave up to stay around ain't worth considering. But be sure you get on your agenda some old people and try to figure out what it will be like if you are a raging radical fifty years from today.

Think about yourself that way. What would you be like if you had white hair and had not given up your principles? It might be wise as you deal with coalition efforts to think about the possibilities of going for fifty years. It calls for some care. I'm not gonna be suicidal, if I can help it. Sometimes you don't even know you just took a step that could take your head off cause you can't know everything when you start to coalesce with these people who sorta look like you in just one aspect but really they belong to another group. That is really the nature of women. It does not matter at all that biologically we have being women in common. We have been organised to have our primary cultural signals come from some other factors than that we are women. We are not from our base acculturated to be women people, capable of crossing our first people boundaries — Black, White, Indian, etc.

Now if we are the same women from the same people in this barred room, we never notice it. That stuff stays wherever it is. It does not show up until somebody walks into the room who happens to be a woman but really is also somebody else. And then out comes who we really are. And at that point you are not a woman. You are Black or you are Chicana or you are Disabled or you are Racist or you are White. The fact that you are a woman is not important at all and it is not the governing factor to your existence at that moment. I am now talking about bigotry and everybody's got it. I am talking about turning the century with some principles intact. Today wherever women gather together it is not necessarily nurturing. It is coalition building. And if you feel the strain, you may be doing some good work. So don't come to no women's festival looking for comfort unless you brought it in your little tent. And then if you bring it in your tent don't be inviting everybody in because everybody ain't your company, and then you won't be able to stand the festival. Am I confusing you? Yes, I am. If coalition is so bad, and so terrible, and so uncomfortable,

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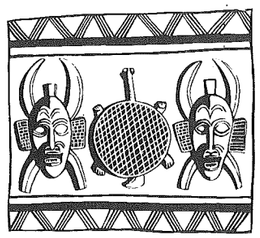

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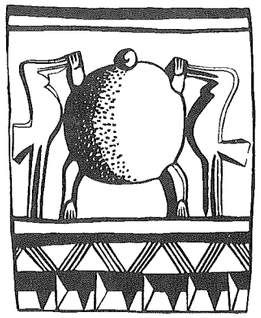
why is it necessary? That's what you're asking. Because the barred rooms will not be allowed to exist. They will all be wiped out. That is the plan that we now have in front of us.

Now these little rooms were created by some of the most powerful movements we have seen in this country. I'm going to start with the Civil Rights movement because of course I think that that was the first one in the era we're in. Black folks started it, Black folks did it, so everything you've done politically rests on the efforts of my people – that's my arrogance! Yes, and it's the truth; it's my truth. You can take it or leave it, but that's the way I see it. So once we did what we did, then you've got women, you've got Chicanos, you've got the Native Americans, and you've got homosexuals, and you got all of these people who also got sick of somebody being on their neck. And maybe if they come together, they can do something about it. And I claim all of you as coming from something that made me who I am. You can't tell me that you ain't in the Civil Rights movement. You are in the Civil Rights movement that we created that just rolled up to your door. But it could not stay the same, because if it was gonna stay the same it wouldn't have done you no good. Some of you would not have caught yourself dead near no Black folks walking around talking about freeing themselves from racism and lynching. So by the time our movement got to you it had to sound like something you knew about. Like if I find out you're gay, you gonna lose your job.



JUDY STEVENS

There were people who came South to work in the movement who were not Black. Most of them were white when they came. Before it was over, that category broke up – you know, some of them were Jewish, not simply white, and some others even changed their names. Say if it was Mary when they came South, by the time they were finished it was Maria, right? It's called finding yourself. At some point, you cannot be fighting oppression and be oppressed yourself and not feel it. Within the Black movement there was also all of the evils of the society, so that anything that was happening to you in New York or the West Coast probably also happened to you in another way, within the movement. And as you became aware of that you tried to talk to these movement people about how you felt. And they say, "Well let's take that up next week. Because the most important thing now is that Black people are being oppressed and we must work with that." Watch these mono-issue people. They ain't gonna do you no good. I don't care who they are. And there are people who prioritise the cutting line of the struggle. And they say the cutting line is this issue, and more than anything we must move on this issue and that's automatically saying that whatever's bothering you will be put down if you bring it up. You have to watch these folks. Watch these groups that can only deal with one thing at a time. On the other hand, learn about space within coalition. You can't have everybody sitting up there talking about everything that concerns you at the same time or you won't get no place.

It must become necessary for all of us to feel that this is our world. And that we are here to stay and that anything that is here is ours to take and to use in our image. And watch that 'our' – make it as big as you can – it ain't got nothing to do with that barred room. The 'our' must include everybody you have to include in order for you to survive. You must be sure you understand that you ain't gonna be able to have an 'our' that don't include Bernice Johnson Reagon, cause I don't plan to go nowhere! That's why we have to have coalitions. Cause I ain't gonna let you live unless you let me live. Now there's danger in that, but there's also the possibility that we can both live – if you can stand it.

I want to talk a little about turning the century and the principles. Some of us will be dead. We won't be here. And many of us take ourselves too seriously. We think that what we think is really the cutting line. Most people who are up on the stage take themselves too seriously – it's true. You think that what you've got to say is special and that somebody needs to hear it. That is arrogance. That is egotism, and the only checking line is when you have somebody to pull your coattails. Most of us think that the space we live in is the most important space there is, and that the condition that we find ourselves in is the condition that must be changed or else. That is only partially the case. If you analyse the situation properly, you will know that there might be a few things you can do in your personal, individual interest so that you can experience and enjoy the change. But most of the things that you do, if you do them right, are for people who live long after you are long forgotten. That will only happen if you give it away. Whatever it is that you know, give it away, and don't give it away only on the horizontal. Don't give it away like that, because they're gonna die when you die, give or take a few days. Give it away *that* way (up and down). And what I'm talking about is being very concerned with the world you live in, the condition you find yourself in, and be able to do the kind of analysis that says that what you believe in is worthwhile for human beings in general, and in the future, and do everything you can to thrown yourself into the next century. And make people contend with your baggage, whatever it is. The only way you can take yourself seriously is if you can throw yourself into the next period beyond your little meager human-body-mouth-talking all the time.

I am concerned that we are very shortsighted, and we think that the issue we have at this moment has to be addressed at this moment or we will die. It is not true. It is only a minor skirmish. It must be waged guerrilla-warfare style. You shoot it out, get behind the tree so you don't get killed, because they ain't gonna give you what you asked for. You must be ready to go out again tomorrow and while you're behind the tree you must be training the people who will be carrying the message forward into the next period, when they do kill you from behind the tree.

People who think that the only 'women-only' there are are lesbian women give me a big problem, cause I would have to leave too many of my folk out cause they ain't gonna take that for one second. *And if they came in they would be homophobic*. And you'll have to challenge them about it. Can you handle it? This ain't no nurturing place no more. Cause we're taking over. Anything that says 'Women', we're gonna come. You can forget it. Now if you clean it up and name what it is you want, then you might be able to have it – but we might storm *that* if we don't think it should exist. Cause like it is, it is our world, and we are here to stay. And we are not on the defensive. We are not on the defensive.

There is an offensive movement that started in this country in the '60s that is continuing. The reason we are stumbling is that we are at the point where in order to take the next step we've got to do it with some folk we don't care too much about. And we got to vomit over that for a little while. We must just keep going. The media says that the Civil Rights movement was a dream. The media says that nothing happened in the '70s, and most of us get up on stage and we talk as if that in fact is the case, and it's a lie. The only way it will be true is if you believe them and do not take the next step. Everybody who is in this space at this time belongs here. And it's a good thing if you came. I don't care what you went through or what somebody did to you. Go for yourself. *You* give this weekend everything you can. Because no matter how much of a coalition space this is, it ain't nothing like the coalescing you've got to do tomorrow, and Tuesday and Wednesday, when you really get out there, back into the world: that is ours too.

These festival weekends are places of crisis and you can do wonderful things in a crisis. I remember when I got to Michigan one year and they were talking about how these women during this thunderstorm held down the stage, right? And it was lightening, and they thought "We're Big Amazons", right? That's crisis and it ain't that important what you do in a crisis. You go beyond yourself anyway, and you talk about it for years. In fact, that's all you pay attention to: when that great day happen. You go wishing everyday was like that. Everyday ain't like that, and what really counts is not what you do this weekend, but take what this weekend has meant – try to digest it. And first thing, Monday, Tuesday morning at work, before twenty-four hours go around, apply it. And then do it everyday you get up and find yourself alive. Thank you. □

Based upon a presentation at the West Coast Women's Music Festival 1981, Yosemite National Forest, California.

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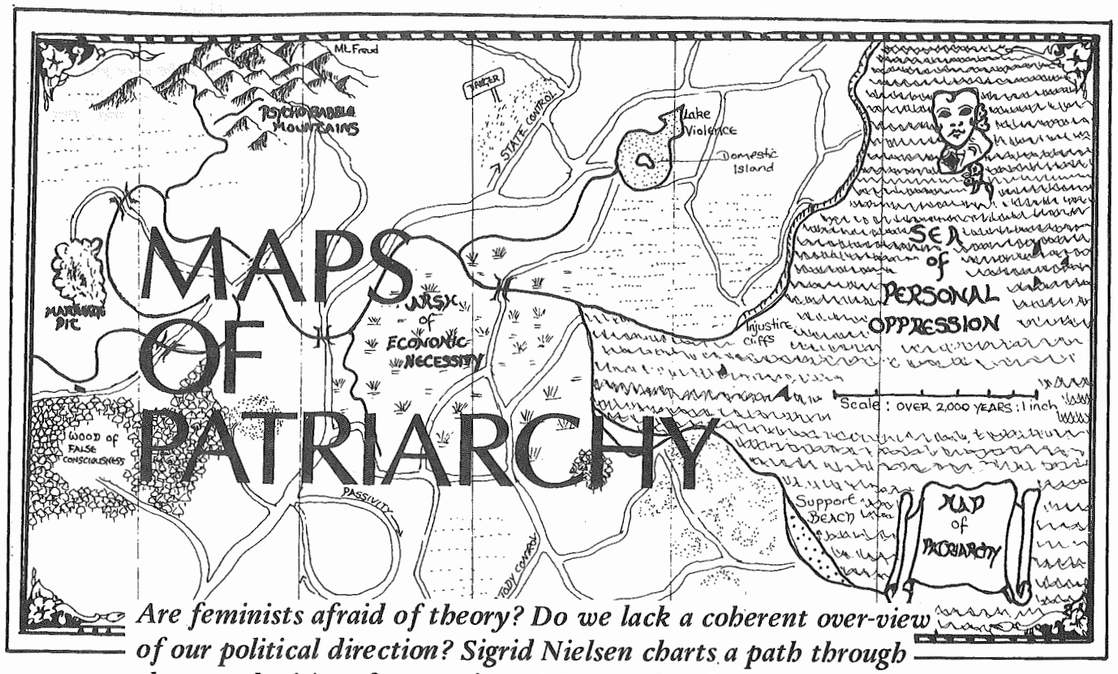
This speech has been shortened, and the full version is available in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith, published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, PO Box 2753, Rockefeller Center Station, New York, NY 10185, USA, in 1983. The book is imported by Airlift Book Company, 14 Baltic St, London EC1.



Are feminists afraid of theory? Do we lack a coherent over-view of our political direction? Sigrid Nielsen charts a path through the complexities of women's social, sexual and economic oppression with the help of French feminist theorist Christine Delphy's 'Close to Home'.

Is feminist theory still being written? The idea — and that formidable word 'theory' — arouses anxiety in some feminists, nostalgia in others. At a recent feminist conference, someone even proposed a workshop called 'Fear of Theory'. But it never took place.

Ask a feminist what 'theory' means to her and she will probably mention two books which are now fifteen years old: *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett and *The Dialectic of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone. These first 'feminist' books, as well as *Woman's Estate* by Juliet Mitchell, tried to define women's oppression, explain how it arose, and point to solutions. Shulamith Firestone, the Cecil B de Mille of feminist theory, even provided her readers with a two-full-page diagram incorporating human history up to a nonsexist, utopian future. Though we think of current feminist writers as heirs of this tradition, they are not writing theory in the same sense. The study of women's oppression has moved from the general to the particular.

The early writers regarded an overall theory as crucial to an effective women's movement. They hoped to understand the world in order to change it. More recent writers have moved away from the idea of bringing about change in institutions such as the law and the economy; instead, they have focused on exploring particular ways in which women are oppressed. Mary Daly, in *Gyn/Ecology*, describes such woman-centred atrocities as footbinding and witch-burning; Andrea Dworkin and Dale Spender have made similar investigations in *Pornography* and *Man Made Language*. These books take oppression as a given. They are not interested in explaining it so much as bearing witness to it.

For the newer writers, theory in the conventional sense, the logical arrangement of facts and ideas, is not important; what matters is women's experience. Dworkin, Daly, and others like Adrienne Rich — seem most concerned to break the silence surrounding women's oppression — to encourage women to use what Dworkin calls "the power of naming" to take control of our own individual lives.

This change in emphasis has not been much discussed, either in print or out of it. Hester Eisenstein, in her book, *Contemporary Feminist Thought*, contrasts the early writers with those who came after Daly, who, she feels, have abandoned political action to concentrate on women's issues in an inward-looking way. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, in *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research*, approve of the change; they maintain that awareness of experience is central to feminism, and that social change is only "personal change multiplied many times". Stanley and Wise are among the few who have described their own progression to the newer emphasis on the personal; on fighting the oppression 'close to home'. Like many other women who worked to establish rape crisis lines, lesbian groups, shelters for women victims of male violence, and similar lifelines, they turned away from the institution-centred theory of the early days with the realisation that most women's lives were limited and dangerous because of the power of individual men. 'The family', 'sex-role stereotyping', 'the state' were secondary oppressors, if, in day-to-day terms, they counted at all.

This focus on the domestic sphere has turned up truths that the 'grand theory' of other times was unable to see. Feminists have realised that, for women, oppression comes not from a few obvious authorities but from all directions, from fathers, husbands, landlords, employers. Feminist writers have made it their task to describe and expose this kind of power, which, because it itself is not organised, cannot be easily fought by organised means such as legislation.

New directions

These changes have influenced the women's movement in a wholly new direction to that which many feminists had expected it to take in the early seventies. It could be argued that the WLM has adapted to discoveries about the source of oppression by decentralising, by trying to become as diverse as oppression itself. Whatever the reason, the WLM has become almost completely structureless. There has been no national WLM conference in this country since 1978. WIRES, set up as the movement's national newsletter, is struggling to survive; some local versions appear more regularly. Only one national feminist publication, *Spare Rib*, has lasted for any length of time in the movement's history. A similar magazine, *The Second Wave*, has just folded in the USA; another, newer one, *Sojourner*, was saved at the last moment. Women's centres are often underused, while smaller groups disappear and reappear in ever larger numbers.

The decentralised approach to feminism has worked uniquely well in encouraging women to identify oppression; but identifying solutions, beyond immediate help for individual women, has not come quite so easily. Legal and social reforms on women's behalf never went far in the early seventies and are now under threat. Some feminists, such as Sheila Rowbotham in *Beyond the Fragments*, have argued that feminist theory on some level of abstraction is necessary for the very organisation of a movement. The fragmented state of the movement today is a powerful argument in her favour.

Though feminism is now more publicly visible than ever before — the International Feminist Book Fair, for instance, attracted hundreds if not thousands in London alone — there has never been less agreement as to what we are about, either in this country or the USA. Shulamith Firestone's casual boast that feminism "has a better record than most" movements in the way of internal quarrelling, now reads rather hollowly. And it is interesting to contrast Firestone's confident hope for women's liberation with the pessimism of Andrea Dworkin, who outlines a future hell of exploitation in *Right Wing Women*, or Mary Daly, whose vision starts with the idea that men are incapable of moral good. Whatever the truth or untruth of these ideas, it is hard to believe that they could have helped to mobilise thousands of women and create a climate

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in which women's experience became credible, as the insights of Firestone and other theorists did.

Sheila Rowbotham argues that theory can be useful to feminists – that it should be accessible and practical, firmly based in experience, yet able to give an overview, like a map, which will enable women to choose the areas they wish to view more closely. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise agree – but they give no examples. And it's hard, thinking over recent feminist political writing in English, to come up with any.

Not long ago, however, an English translation of a book of French feminist theory, *Close to Home*, appeared in the UK. Its author, Christine Delphy, is a sociologist; she has been writing articles on feminist issues since the early seventies. Her book, subtitled "A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression", is a collection of these articles and combines the old style of theory and the new in an unusual way. It may show us the way out of the impasse caused by the contradiction between the need to discover what women's experience has been and the need to organise the knowledge we gain through those discoveries. Christine Delphy launches boldly into the construction of theory, but the results rarely seem to me to betray or obscure experience. Rather, they make me look at my own experience again.

Difficult path

It might be convenient to list my reservations at the beginning and to point out that the road Christine Delphy maps is by no means well-signposted. We are lucky to have this book when translations are equally rare in feminist publishers' lists as they are in the lists of mainstream publishers in Britain. But neither Christine Delphy nor her translator has given us a sense of the development of French feminist thinking over the years her articles cover, 1970–1984. Why has Delphy not shared the Anglo-American interest in cultural and sexual questions? Has the French movement taken a completely different direction? Delphy and Leonard provide only a very limited overview. A few footnotes and references mention French publications, such as *Questions Feministes*, and French feminist factions, such as 'Psych et Po'*, whose "commercial practices" Delphy is said to oppose, but *Close to Home* doesn't go into detail. It also omits to give any personal background to Delphy herself, nor mention of her other publications (if any). We are meant to see Delphy and French feminism in the light of theory alone.

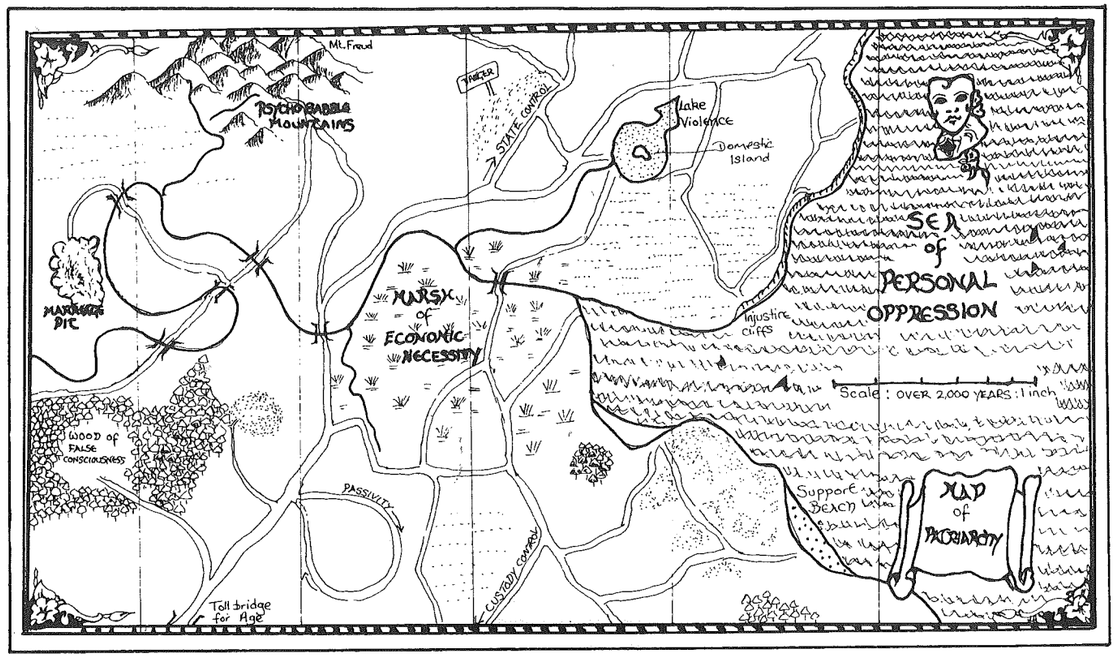
Like so much feminist writing today, several of Delphy's papers were written as part of ongoing debates. The lack of background information therefore makes it hard to sense Delphy's purpose in writing, her audience or the precise attitudes she is supporting or attacking. The reader of Delphy's book should be prepared to feel as if she were arriving in France with a feminist phrase book and little else. Furthermore, Delphy doesn't write – or hasn't been translated into – accessible, spoken-rhythm prose. She occasionally uses clumsy expressions such as "women-wives" or "reification-deification" in order to make a point. Her style is not jargon-ridden, but I think it's fair to call it forceful rather than graceful, and rewarding rather than easy.

Hidden economy

Delphy's articles deal with women's position in the family as well as feminist debates on exploitation and oppression. Her importance to English-speaking feminists lies in the subjects she chooses to write about. Her goal is to explore the relations between the domestic world and the 'larger' world of sociology and official economics. Firestone and Millett took this second sphere as 'the' world; most recent feminist writers focus on the first. Christine Delphy looks at both worlds in an economic context, but she comes to her ideas through people's experience, from studying farm families in rural France.

One of the best articles in her book, "Sharing the Same Table", comes out of this study. In this piece Delphy looks at the ways rural families divide food. Although, as she points out, the image of the family table suggests a fair and good-natured share-out, the reality is a matter of status. The nutritional needs of each person have very little to do with it. In many parts of rural France the old live on cereal and broth, "the young are always hungry" and the best food is kept locked in the master's

*See *Trouble and Strife* No.2



LOU HART

bedroom. Adult women, who prepare the food, are meant to take the least share and a farmwife who makes herself a cup of coffee in the course of a day is considered sinful.

This unequal share-out is justified by common sayings such as "men need meat", "wine gives men strength" and "a woman who drinks is worthless". And these food customs reflect the status system on the farm as a whole. Women's work is always called 'light' work, while men's is 'heavy', even though women may do jobs which are called 'heavy' and done by men in other parts of France. Women work entirely unpaid on a French farm. Furthermore, their work does not figure in official valuations of the farm's worth. A farm family which raises a pig for its own consumption is officially considered to have saved only the price they would have paid for it at the market. The value of the hours of preparation and cooking by women is ignored. As Delphy says, either French farmers are eating their food raw, or women's labour has no monetary value.

From these and other examples Delphy builds her theory of women's economic oppression. There are, she says, two economies: the money economy, in which goods and labour have fixed rates of exchange, and the domestic economy, where goods and services change hands without being bought or sold. Gifts, inheritance and exchanges belong to this realm, and so do the livings of most women and children and many old people, who are maintained, not paid. Millions of people live their lives within the domestic economy, yet economic theory and research alike ignore these exchanges because they are not expressed in monetary terms. The domestic economy is considered to have no effect on the 'real' economy of paid work. And it is not only on farms that women's work is officially worthless.

Delphy is equally careful to give many examples of the domestic economy in everyday life. Housework, done without pay by most of the 80% of married women, is an obvious example, but by no means the only one. Farm women and children – and in some areas, the master's brothers and sisters – also contribute their labour for

A farm family which raises a pig for its own consumption is officially considered to have saved only the price they would have paid for it at the market . . . Either French farmers are eating their food raw, or women's labour has no monetary value.

Patriarchy is a place – a place where women, children and a few men work without fixed hours, contracts, without the right to negotiate, join a union, change jobs or the chance to earn more.

nothing but room and board. Many small businesses work in the same way, with the man as sole owner and his wife invisibly employed to keep the books, answer the telephone, and make the tea. When Delphy describes these relations as a form of serfdom, she is making a precise statement. These people – millions of them – work on terms set by another person, with limited freedom to change their jobs and little or no legal protection.

Anyone who has ever felt 'patriarchy' was an abstract or fanciful notion should read the two articles in which Delphy outlines these ideas, "The Main Enemy" and "Housework or Domestic Work?", and think again. Patriarchy is a place – a place where people (women, children and a few men) work without fixed hours, contracts, without the right to negotiate, the right to join a union, the right to change jobs, or the chance to earn more.

The theory of the domestic mode of production is outlined mainly in these two pieces. But Delphy isn't content to describe her research or her theory: she goes on to apply it to feminist questions. One of the most interesting is the question of middle class women, whose oppression is often seen as trivial compared to the 'real' oppression of working-class men. Delphy argues that middle class women are as thoroughly caught in the domestic mode as working-class women and that if their master provides them with better physical living conditions, it is not necessarily because he wants them to be comfortable – and certainly not because he wants them to be free.

Counter-arguments

The rest of the writings in the book are, in fact, answers to people Delphy sees as opponents of feminism, or misguided allies. Ironically, these articles are harder to follow than the pieces on economic or sociological questions because they answer writers or groups who are never described to the British reader. Who is Annie Leclerc, author of *Parole de Femme*? For those of us who don't read French fluently, what is the real idiomatic meaning of that title? Later, when Delphy replies to two English writers Michele Barratt and Mary McIntosh ("A Materialist Feminism *is* possible"), she omits the original opening section of her article which, presumably, summarised the two writers' argument. *Feminist Review* No. 1, where the article originally appeared, is five years old and unlikely to be found in any but large city libraries and well-read feminist households. Those without access must struggle along with Delphy's counter-arguments as if we were listening to one side of a conversation, trying to pick up the sense of the whole. Delphy furiously counters Barratt and McIntosh's questioning of her use of data regarding farm families, who are only 10% of the population.

> The actual number of farmers' wives is immaterial to the argument. Even if there was only one of them, and she lived 10,000 miles from the English shore, as long as women in England still did the washing-up, and I had been led to believe that they do by biased informants, my analysis will have no problem in crossing the Channel.

It must be said that, based on what Delphy gives us of Barratt and McIntosh's article, she does appear to have the better of the argument. She writes fiercely and bitterly and accuses Barratt and McIntosh and socialist feminists in general, of covering up for men. But, far from contenting herself with this accusation, she challenges socialist feminists to show *why* the solidarity of women and men is so important to them and whether "there must necessarily be close and permanent relations between most females and most males at all times". This idea, she believes, is one of the basic foundations of patriarchy and remains to be explored.

In her most passionate piece, "Patriarchy, Feminism and Their Intellectuals", Delphy warns of the dangers of the academic viewpoint, honestly discusses the contradictions inherent in her job and her feminism and inveighs against the use of theory to impress other theorists. "There is no Science that can tell us that we are oppressed", she says. "Oppression is the experience of being unjustly treated, which becomes objective when it is shared". Oddly, Delphy appears to be under attack in France because she is too polemical, too personal, not 'theoretical' enough. Until we learn more about her supporters and opponents, it will be impossible to confirm this impression. But from an Anglo-American perspective Delphy's willingness to create and support an analysis of women's oppression is a daring step and a hopeful one. □

Christine Delphy *Close to Home* trans. Diana Leonard (Hutchinson 1984).
Kate Millett *Sexual Politics* (Virago 1977).
Shulamith Firestone *The Dialectic of Sex* (Jonathon Cape 1971).
Juliet Mitchell *Woman's Estate* (Penguin 1971).
Mary Daly *Gyn/Ecology* (Women's Press 1978).
Andrea Dworkin *Pomography* (Women's Press 1981).
Dale Spender *Man Made Language* (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1980).
Hester Eisenstein *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Unwin 1984).
Liz Stanley & Sue Wise *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research* (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1983).
Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal & Hilary Wainwright *Beyond the Fragments* (Merlin Press 1979).
Andrea Dworkin *Right Wing Women* (Women's Press 1983).

Writing and Roaring

Feminist fiction must break away from established literary norms if it is ever to become more than an indignant off-stage roar. Patricia Duncker examines contemporary women's writing in search of the truly political feminist novel.

Feminist fiction is remarkably akin to the literature of conversion. The process that is charted, celebrated, usually in the life of one woman, our heroine, is a process of transformation and metamorphosis. Benighted women travellers, usually married or in some sense dependent upon men reach their particular point on the road to Damascus. The blinding light also has a traditional shape; the woman reads a book, meets an old friend who has chosen another life, encounters a ravishing lesbian, admits she loathes sex as currently practised, hears just once too often some man shouting down the street about the size of her tits. And the prelude, which can in fact take up the whole novel, ends. The drama of living in a new world, recreated by feminist faith, begins. Most feminist novels become cautious at this point. It is here that the bravest writers actually begin.

Novels of process, feminist titles often reflect the nature of their journey: Kate Chopin *The Awakening* (1899, reprinted Women's Press 1978), Margaret Atwood *Surfacing* (1972), Joan Barfoot *Gaining Ground* (1978), Verena Stefan *Shedding* (1975). Stefan's original German title was *Häutungen*. This word is used to describe snakes, sloughing off their old and dead skins. In every case a woman living an illusion is born again into a real if brutal world. The process is chilly, sobering, but worth it. The heroines grow up. And the intention behind these novels is overt, transparent. These are saint's lives. Their function is political.

Feminist fiction comes out of a cultural consciousness that knows itself to be under threat and is committed to changing the world. Intentionally or otherwise the women who write feminist fiction propose and imagine a revolution. I chart my territory, quite consciously, as feminist fiction rather than as women's writing. There is a reason for this. Not all writing by women, for women, is either feminist or radical. It would be quite hard to argue that there was anything intrinsically revolutionary in romantic novels. Yet these books are written largely by women for women. And they inirror, quite precisely, the unequivocal power relations of subjection and domination that are current between women and men as everyday reality. Romantic novels also reflect the structure of power that is salaciously consumed by men within the covers of hardcore pornography. It is the imbalance of power that is perceived as erotic. Romantic novels endorse this understanding of sexuality, an image of eroticism which reflects women's status within every culture – as subjects, colonised beings.

Feminist fiction is about the reclamation of power and control, the invasion of space both on the page and in the imagination that is ours by right and from which we have been systematically exiled and excluded. The enterprise of feminist fiction is the assertion of innner integrity, against received opinion, against accepted norms. If a woman perceives herself as she is perceived within our culture she has already capitulated. Thus even the process of finding the Self who writes is an embattled, oppositional struggle. But the form of the novel is not neutral, nor is literary discourse. When we sit down before the blank page of art whose language do we grasp? Whose form? Whose tradition?

There have been feminist writers whose undiluted polemic cannot be easily assimilated. Mysteriously, as in the case of Mary Wollstonecraft, they have never achieved the status of literature. Feminist fiction has drawn in their voices. Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977), as American blockbuster, the feminist fictional equivalent of fast food, is not concerned to engage with any kind of literary tradition, masculine or otherwise. Her book is a fist in the face, agit-prop fiction. Chapter 18, Book 3, is the ideological core of the book.

> You think I hate men. I guess I do, . . . But the truth is I am sick unto death of four thousand years of males telling me how rotten my sex is. Especially it makes me sick when I look around and see such rotten men and such magnificent women . . . my pearl is hatred: my hatred is learned from experience: that is not prejudice. I wish it were prejudice. Then perhaps, I could unlearn it. (pp289–291).

The Women's Room is about the experience of being socially constructed as a woman. French's novel sets the pitch for roaring. And reproduces all the patterns common to feminist fiction; the heroine as the naive victim of familial ideology, the women's group meetings, the awakening consciousness, the bold new life, chilly disillusionment. Even the husband who gives the heroine the boot is a monster called Norm. Mr Normal. Mr Husband. Mr Monster.

Men who are monsters figure frequently in feminist fiction and they are the occasion for various kinds of roaring. The men conform to two potential analyses, which women produce to explain them; the liberal 'But-men-are-oppressed-too . . .' theory and the radical conspiracy theory. Men on the hard-core Left argue loudly and convincingly that the structures must be changed. They talk about Race, Class and Gender. We all agree. But the global struggle always becomes more important than an abdication of their personal privilege, particularly if that means cleaning the lavatory or taking responsibility for what's in the fridge. Verena Stefan's two lefties in *Shedding*, Dave and Samuel, are chilling portraits of selfishness and egotism. The men on the liberal Left will argue that it is up to each individual man to change himself and improve his relationship to his women. The revolution starts here. I would agree with this; but men police each other's behaviour very efficiently. Just as women do. And we have never seen men as a group uniting to dismantle the structures which uphold their privilege. There are very few men, however seriously convinced by the arguments of feminism who are willing to break ranks and to risk the disapproval and ostracism of other men. Feminist fiction reflects this. The liberal monsters appear in Joan Barfoot's two fine novels, *Gaining Ground* (1978), and *Dancing in the Dark* (1982). These are the caring monsters who live within received patterns and codes, and who are genuinely surprised when they are abandoned and murdered.

Rage offstage

Rage is the source of the roar in feminist fiction; but anger is politically and artistically useless if it is not sharpened by analysis and controlled by form. Michele Roberts' first two novels, *A Piece of the Night* (1978) and *The Visitation* (1983) enclose the feminist debate on sexuality, the classic territory of women's fiction.

A Piece of the Night is a novel of process; the anti-heroine, Julie Fanchot, a Catholic girl, uneasily submissive to her social conditioning, shaving her legs and her armpits, marries a cardboard Oxford don, eventually resurrects her nascent lesbian tendencies and builds the inevitable new life, a lesbian household in South London. The marriage was miserable, but the new life proves equally unsatisfactory.

> It is impossible to say what I want, since those words define me as lacking so much, as being invisible, as having no speech that is understood. My speech is nagging, is sulks and explosions, silence and tears. Nobody understands that; or if they hear me roar, if I am daring and roar, they mutter how she whines, just like a woman . . . (p155).

This passage is acute. Women do not have any language, even between ourselves that is shared and understood. The problem in Roberts' work is bound up with roaring and writing. *A Piece of the Night* attempts to give a correct political line while reflecting the ambivalence and difficulty of following prescribed political patterns. The feminist credo is a long dogmatic roar offstage; who invented it is never argued or made clear, so that it looks suspiciously like lurking received opinion, unexamined, unexplained.

On the page Roberts is busy writing. The result is not the 'complexity of authentic experience', but stylistic and political confusion. And just what is 'authentic experience' anyway? Whose? Against the accusations, 'All women are like that', 'She wants it really. They all do', feminist women roar back, 'Here are our stories, our lives, several and shared. As many stories as there are women'.

In the novel the communal kitchen is described as idyllic.

> It spills with books, plants, children's toys, pictures and photographs, notice-boards, five women's sense of style mixed cheerfully together. (p15)

Then on the following page it is made clear that the house is anything but cheerful.

> Jenny doesn't need me anyway, she has begun to sleep with Barbara as well as with me. We do not believe in monogamy, our lives are exemplary, free from jealousy. I am going away, I remove myself from problems. (p16)

The effect of these contradictions, unanalysed, littering the pages, is to belittle the endeavour of trying to live differently, outside heterosexist ideologies. Despite the splintered, overtly modernist form of the book Roberts is committed to naturalism. We are meant to read these women as real; with real problems and real dilemmas, real moral choices. She presents her women as much more solidly trapped by male ideologies than — I suspect — we actually are. Naturalism is the imagination's political prison. We are bound by detail, by things, and by the order of things. Naturalism can have a very radical effect in the theatre, where speaking, breathing beings actually slam the stage door on their way out, as does Ibsen's Nora, departing from her matrimonial *Doll's House* at the end of the play. But in fiction naturalism kills political dreams. The inclusion of surface detail as if the simple accumulation of objects, sensations, perceptions explains anything is naive and politically irresponsible. The fact that Roberts' Julie finds it as hard to be married as to live in a lesbian commune is not explicable simply because all men are brutes and all radical lesbian separatists sleep with anything that moves. But *A Piece of the Night* does give this impression. Her characters wander in political voids. Her novels are like television soap operas which David Edgar recently described as "a continuous, endlessly repeated series of equivalent domestic conflicts and reconciliations".

Roberts substitutes ornament for analysis. This is why both her books become curiously patchworked with obtrusive, unfocused descriptions. And why, on occasions, she sinks without trace into a morass of cliches. When she describes men this degenerates into the very worst kind of women's own magazine serial writing. Here is Roberts in *The Visitation:*

> . . . he radiates energy even while tipping a long stream of cold wine down his throat. He is not particularly tall, . . . a compact muscular frame, small hips tightly encased in

> faded blue jeans . . . his hands thatched with fine black hairs . . . his face . . . carved out of skin and bone . . . deep growl . . . stands up in one swift uncoiling movement . . . this animal grace of his . . . rasping voice . . . (pp128–9)

To be fair, it isn't only Roberts to whom this happens. See Marilyn French on Ben. " . . . Ben who was so vivid, his thick dark-haired arms, his hair streaming uncontrolledly out of his scalp like grass . . ." (*The Women's Room*, p677). But French has no pretensions; *The Women's Room* is one long unambiguous roar. Roberts' hero, animal sexuality in bulk, is the ideal man of the romantic novel. 'Ah, but . .' Roberts will say to me, 'You're a feminist aren't you?' You respect other women's perceptions and experiences. And these were my perceptions and my experiences'. And so we must return to the problem of experience. And therefore the difference between women's writing and feminist fiction. Let me explain.

LIZ CROSSLEY

Heterosexuality reclaimed

Roberts' second novel, *The Visitation*, is about loving men. Men form the centre, shape the book and the heroine's consciousness. The only other woman of significance is the heroine's close friend Beth who lives in Leeds – never visited by the book, although Bangkok is – she's a member of the Communist Party and pregnant. There are no longer any lesbians in sight. It is with Beth that Helen, the heroine, has the only conversation of any real significance in the entire novel (pp87–9 if you're interested).

But the book is really about reclaiming heterosexuality. This too is an ambitious project and a good one to work on. Roberts sets out to gauge the division between women's private, creative, reproductive space and men's destructive public space even unto the level of nuclear politics, by plumbing the sexual division. Why indeed are women sexually chained, leaving the boys to make their nuclear toys? It's just that it's not clear to me that we will stop men misruling and destroying the world by being sweetly polite to them and teaching them to screw us nicely so that it doesn't hurt. Especially not when Roberts is working with a notion of natural sexuality; which is in fact animal. The men are leopards, eagles, humming-birds, salmon, even angels.

> Once he had wings, this man. Terrible as the angel with the flaming sword outside the gates of paradise he has caused the old Helen to die and the new one to be born . . . (p146)

Men have had the power of life and death over women for too long – too long for me to be able to read that sentence with comfortable indifference. The pornographic sexuality also described in the book; black stockinged, pubic hair shaving brothel fantasies in which the heroine acquiesces and which her twin brother enjoys, is supposed to be alarming in contrast to the scenes of mutual eroticism. But I question the political and artistic wisdom of these passages; particularly since the Women's Liberation Movement has been arguing for hundreds and hundreds of years, that there is no natural sexuality and that the codes within which women and men operate are in fact male sexual ideologies masquerading as natural law.

The climax of *The Visitation* takes us back to Eden where heterosexual sex proves to be Paradise Regained. This is the medicine that will heal the sick divisions of our culture.

> She is whole, she knows that now and she can see all the different sides of herself: the masculine and the feminine; the productive and the reproductive; the receiving and the creative; the light and the dark; the rational and the irrational; the active and the passive. She needs to embrace all these parts of herself if she is to live without being maimed. Here are the twins after all . . . (p175)

There are two points here, neither of which

I would accept. Even in the process of claiming that they are overcome, Roberts endorses the division of men into mind, light, reason; women into body, darkness, passion. Secondly, she suggests that it is only in the sexual union of woman and man that the rift can be bridged and Utopian Eden be reclaimed. This is not a helpful message for nuns, monks, lesbians, mothers whose primary relationship is with their children, women who choose women, men who choose men, or people of both sexes who happen to consider their political bonds with their comrades in struggle as the most hopeful highroad to revolution.

The last part of the book turns into a graveyard and poses the threat. Women and men must love one another or "shrivel to skeletons of black lace" (p177) in nuclear war. Or rather, women must put their efforts into loving men to stave off the holocaust. Significantly it is the heroine who goes in search of her twin brother to unite the masculine and the feminine. The men aren't looking for us. I'm glad that nuclear war did make an appearance eventually, because the central problem with the ideology of the book is that Roberts presents personal decisions as if they were made freely and as if they were what shaped our lives. If Beth, as an informed member of the Communist Party, was allowed to write a bit of the novel she might well have argued otherwise.

The politics of experience doesn't work as a subject if you end up writing about experience and not about politics. We don't make love in a political vacuum. What has changed since 1978 and the publication of *A Piece of the Night*? We have seen the coming of Thatcher and Reagan and the advent of cruise missiles. I'm not suggesting that Roberts should have written directly about contemporary politics; but I am suggesting that the personal sexual mores of the middle classes are shaped by these things and do not exist divorced from the social process.

Beyond the contradictions

And this brings me back to the problem of experience, the authority of experience. There's an inflexible determinism built into writing that insists on the unchanging nature or the bedrock essence of women, men, sexuality. Roberts, in her own novels, is a faceless author, politically neutral. Behind her she leaves a chaos of unfinished patterns and perceptions; women left in the murky residue of male ideologies. And that is usually the central ingredient of women's raw experience, male ideology. Roberts faithfully reproduces the contradictions of that experience, but she shows her heroines locked inside those contradictions. Consider by contrast the following passages from Verena Stefan's *Shedding*. Stefan's analysis of men, the left-wing variety, is terrifying. She dismantles, in one paragraph, the liberal hypothesis with which Roberts is working, that 'All men are not like that. The man I love is not like that.'

> A man, who is in general a menace, is supposed to be worth loving taken as an individual. A masculine body, which is in general dangerous, is supposed to become desirable taken as an individual. Our every day is filled with such schizophrenia. A woman alone can hardly survive if she is not willing to disown her self. For as long as she has the patronage of one individual man, she need not worry about all the others and the threat they represent. (p20)

If we believe that it is both possible and reasonable to live these contradictions and that Stefan is wrong, we accept the most pessimistic assessment of what men are. We accept a world in which rape or the threat of rape is our daily bread; a world in which women are encircled by men, owned by men, policed by men, in which the uncertain patronage of one individual man is a survival strategy. If Stefan's analysis is correct, and if we, as women refuse to disown our right to live as free beings, then there is only one other choice – revolution.

It is exceedingly difficult to struggle for revolution within the pages of a book without a tenaciously critical understanding of form. The novel – whether it be traditional realist fiction or self-consciously experimental – is an open form; a real, loose baggy monster, imperfect, fractured, split. But it is not, as I have said, politically neutral.

This fact shows up sharply in lesbian writing. The novel works towards synthesis, resolution, marriage. The liberal bourgeois novel is coercive and heterosexist. Radclyffe Hall's classic book, *The Well of Loneliness*

(1928) illustrates precisely what I mean. It's a novel from the 'sick and sorry' school of lesbian writing and I don't propose to defend its gory sentimentalism. But it's a brave book, occasionally bitingly accurate. Radclyffe Hall was prepared to put herself on the line to defend her kind and confront the savage homophobia abroad in 1928. She did of course have the money and class to do so. One of the reasons that *The Well of Loneliness* lies like miserable, unleavened dough on the stomach is bound up with the question of form. Girl meets girl is not more intrisically revolutionary or interesting than boy meets girl if the novelist is remorselessly keen to accept the butch/femme divisions of heterosexism. The heroine Stephen Gordon is a pseudo-man who wears ties and tweeds and who swaggers. Her lover Mary is pretty and feminine, regularly designated as 'the girl'. The savage edge of the book is buried somewhere in the blood bath of emotional catholic martyrdom at the end, when Stephen hands Mary back to a real man and to the bourgeois world of marriage. The implication is clear. A society which refuses to recognise those who live by choice outside its fixed normative categories is coercive, authoritarian, violent. We still live in that society.

I am not willfully attacking writing that deals with the inward life of the soul. But I am suggesting that novels which are about inner feelings – love, sexuality, desire – do run the risk of becoming self-indulgent, confessional trivia if they are written from the naive perspective which sees the inner world as the pure space; the sacred circle into which the outside world cannot enter and which it does not touch. Only when it is quite clearly perceived that the inner world is shaped, formed, even perverted by the struggles and ideologies of our political context does the bitter reality of women's lives cut the page.

Fiction is an oblique, artificial method of expression. It relates to itself and to other fictions, not directly to social reality. Novels are not real; not even confessional, autobiographical novels. This is the source of revolutionary utopianism which is inherent in imaginative writing, but only in writing that has broken free from a simplistic attempt to mirror the world. We can imagine new ways of feeling, living, new worlds which shatter the accepted norms of what counts as experience. Politics therefore become an aspect of style. It is not enough to imitate the world; we must create it anew, and in our image. We are against nature. Or what the world has given to us as natural. Our writing should not reflect this natural world, but the world made strange.

At the root of this discussion is a difficulty that is peculiar to all radical writing, but is particularly visible and problematic in feminist fiction. Roberts writes as if a universal meaning and a common resolution were still possible. But we have no common language; we are not coherent beings. We live within a sexist structure which renders us contradictory and senseless. The circle of oppressive ideology with men on the rim creates the conditions within which women splinter apart, both within themselves and from each other. Only isolated, individual political solutions are possible. I do not offer this as a counsel of despair. It is the recognition of the need for a politics of style, both in the way we write and how we live. The structures which constrain and destroy us are not monolithic. Or none of these women would be writing at all.

Feminism is neither a pious utopian hope for a better world nor the sum of every woman's experience. It is a political analysis of the ways in which women are oppressed by men and the structures men have made. Feminism is a response to male power and male privilege. We are therefore, in all our writing, necessarily confrontational, in opposition. We will always write polemic. And polemic can never be objective or disinterested. Polemic argues a case. Feminist writers are necessarily polemicists and will take up the page to harangue, bully and persuade. Roaring is undiluted polemic, the just rage of women who have been smothered, frustrated, destroyed. Writing, even women's writing, has too often worn the straitjacket of art, male art, male ideology. We must craft our roaring with subtlety and cunning and learn to be artful, in every sense of the word. But on our own terms. □

This article is part of a larger project on women's writing and feminist fiction.

Marilyn French *The Women's Room* (1977 New York: Jove 1978).
Michele Roberts *A Piece of the Night* (The Women's Press 1978). *The Visitation* (The Women's Press 1983).
Radclyffe Hall *The Well of Loneliness* (1928: Virago 1982).
Verena Stefan *Shedding* (1975: The Women's Press 1979).
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EVEN SUPERWOMAN GETS THE BLUES

Have we as feminists simply imposed unachievable new standards on ourselves? Rosy Williamson challenges the reasons why we see some women as successful and others as failures.

In this society most women are brought up to feel inferior in some ways. In fact, most people grow up under pressure to "shape up" in countless ways, and are secretly insecure because we know we are not as strong and perfect as it is normal to pretend to be. When feminists stick to the conventional view that it is inferior to feel inferior, and that timid, ineffectual, "untogether" women deserve some scorn – we are blaming each other, and implicitly all women for what patriarchy has done to us. Society tells us we are inferior as women. This is so particularly if we are Black, working-class, lesbian or disabled – or fall short in any other way of accepted ideals. Patriarchy encourages us to try to apologise, by our meekness for our "inferiority", then feminists, or others, may blame us for failing to shake off these feminine traits.

So, I want to discuss feminist scorn of all sorts of supposed inferiority and lack of confidence, and to try to connect this with the widespread ignoring of the existence of "mentally ill" women.

I am writing this mainly in reaction to the *Trouble and Strife* article against feminist therapy (in No.3). My response springs from my own experience. I am white, middle-class – albeit long unemployed – and I have been depressed and anorexic on and off for the last 13 years. For the last two years I have felt too unsure of myself to do anything or have any friends.

Lately, I have succeeded, after a long struggle, in getting a woman therapist on

the NHS. I have not been in a feminist therapy group, and am writing from a particular viewpoint. I also know many dangers in accepting therapy generally, which there is no space to discuss here, but I am *not* arguing for most therapy now available.

The feminist therapy article assumed that all feminists involved in therapy are fairly on top of things. This denies the existence and desperate needs of many women like myself, who remain effectively paralysed, needing more help than can be expected from consciousness raising (c.r.) groups or friends. There are problems with having a therapist: it gives more space to one woman, but also involves a power relationship. It is hard for the "patient" to hold on to her own perspectives and beliefs. I recognise too that we need to change in more active ways. But when some of us have struggled and lost hope of becoming strong and active without such help, it is arrogant to write it off as a luxury and as if we were irrelevant.

We are part of the world that needs changing

The article also denied that we have all been shaped by our pasts, and that it is worth trying to change ourselves by understanding this process on an individual basis. Instead, it said we should be busy changing the world and not ourselves, as if to admit that we need changing would imply that society does not. The untruth of the either/or approach is obvious: it sounds neat but denies the complexity of reality. We are part of the world, much of which needs changing. Our interactions with the patriarchal world have helped to shape us in ways we may not like. Our political understanding must include a recognition and investigation of how all people have been deeply influenced by the society around us, mainly in such a way as to perpetuate the social structure.

Of course, we cannot hope to undo all our conditioning and return to an ideal "natural" self – but we can distinguish what parts of ourselves we like or dislike and hope to change, or at least to understand. This dissolves the line drawn between those of us clearly desperate for therapy, and the together feminists for whom it is seen as necessarily a waste of time. I do not mean to say that all feminists should enter therapy, just that I don't see why some shouldn't. I cannot believe that anyone is completely "well-balanced". Sisterhood often wears thin, we manipulate, compete, show off, put down – we deny what is too uncomfortable to face, such as our racism, or our personal/political mistakes. There are also feelings about relationships and sex, from possessiveness to masochism, that we need to examine and change.

Understanding our pasts means understanding patriarchy

It is important to agree that none of us is ideal, and that we are limited neither by innate badness nor solely by our immediate conditions – besides the latter we are affected also by more subtle long term influences. The individual factors which have affected each of us are all ultimately results of patriarchal and other oppressive social structures. Even in specific situations, any individual explanation of how one is will also be, in feminist terms, a political one. Any investigation into how our pasts have shaped us must sharpen our understanding and hatred of the patriarchal institutions – and our will and power to change them. I cannot really imagine how feminist therapy could keep its attention away from the revolutionary implications, surely it ought to find itself inevitably working as c.r. does?

As in c.r., an understanding of the influences upon us frees us from blaming ourselves. For instance, I wish to find out why I was dependant for so long on male approval (only partly because feminists' liking seemed harder to win!). I am anxious to explain this aspect of myself because I am deeply ashamed of it and feel inherently inferior to feminists who quickly waded into the WLM as soon as they found it and became admirably man-free. I can also hope to understand similar feelings in other women through my own – instead of criticising them the more vehemently for seeing in them something I suppress and deny in myself.

We need the truth, not slogans

One reason why many feminists feel the need to assert ourselves and score points over each other must be because we feel insecure, half-conscious of not living up to our idealised picture of the together feminist, and afraid that others will detect this, or simply afraid of scorn from other women. I know that this fear deters me from going to meetings and makes me overmeek and silent. It also leads me to show off, specially when I feel that I don't look like a "real feminist" so must show that I am by what I say. It seems to be the women most at ease with themselves, ready to be kind and tolerant towards themselves (see Dianne Grimsditch's article in *Catcall* reviewed in *T&S* No. 3) who don't feel the need to prove their own perfection. What they say is more truthful and therefore more politically useful than the sort of sloganising approach which divides the 'bad' world from the 'good' us and thereby denies the real difficulties and complications caused by our being part of the 'bad' world.

It also becomes difficult to assess our political actions if we find it threatening to face our personal/political mistakes. In groups I have been in, like Women's Aid and Rape Crisis, we have often tried to play down our problems and areas of failure, making our work sound more successful, smoothly-running and constantly right-on than it has really been. Of course, if we were more ready to discuss our problems and mistakes and write about them within the WLM we could learn much faster. But, as yet, it is hard to trust other feminists not to blame and put us down for what we reveal.

Feminist ideals

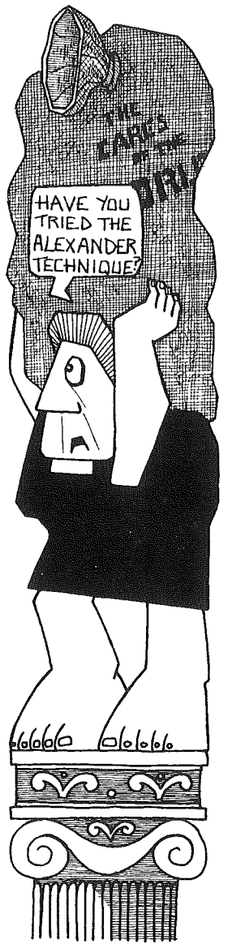
It is widely assumed that every feminist ought to have certain desirable qualities – boundless strength, energy, skill, confidence, social ease, selfless devotion to political activity, and no "personal" problems to distract her. This assumption oppresses not only the untogether aspects of all of us, but especially the most unhappy or crisis-ridden and the disabled or those with health problems. I think that in a society where perfect health is the norm, we are expected to stay out of sight at home if ill/disabled. I do associate some of the qualities that feminists reasonably admire with Black and/or working-class women – but surely the very high level of self confidence, plus skills around writing etc, plus expensive, freshly washed dungarees, all of which are expected by feminists – are more characteristic of middle class and/or ex-student women who are mainly white.

I think there is an important underlying connection between racism, disability-ism, and the scorn for weakness and untogetherness that I am looking at. It is the confident and articulate women, that is, mainly white, middle-class, able-bodied and 'together' – who have the most chance to define the priorities and influence the choice of activities of the WLM. Therefore the perspectives of the most oppressed groups can often be ignored and our subordination perpetuated.

I do like the feminist ideal (or rather my own ideal picture), but we need to understand that it is nobody's inherent fault that makes her fall short of such ideals – and that we all fall short. Self-knowledge through therapy or c.r. is important in gaining this understanding and tolerance. It should enable us to understand better our racism and classism and political mistakes, and to point them out to each other without self-righteousness or guilt tripping.

We all have reason to fear

It is generally assumed that everyone is morally responsible for her own merits and faults. We use approving words like "courageous" to describe women who have overcome such challenges as sexual abuse, or psychiatric hospitalisation – as if women still caught in these traps were there thanks to their lack of courage. Courage, like intelligence and mental illness is a false concept. The word suggests that courage is a thing, a real and measurable quality which certain admirable people have and other poorer specimens lack. But it is not through her inherent amount of courage that one woman is more scared or easily intimidated by the police, her father, or the psychiatric system. The reasons for the variations between us in our ability to face and resist male power lie in our past experiences: the weight of attacks or oppression already received and the more long term influences that make some more generally bold and confident than others.



CATH JACKSON

The word courage has been bothering me because of a letter in the London newsletter blaming women who left the Lesbian Strength march when more arrests seemed possible – for lack of courage. I have been arrested many times and humiliating treatment and courts has helped to reduce me to my present depression and inactivity. This march was almost my first return to the WLM for 2 years, and I knew I'd be shattered by another arrest. I refuse to see myself as an exception, a freak in this matter – we all have good reasons to fear the police and do not deserve to be slagged off for this lack of "courage".

The various categories of mental illness especially suggest that a group of "symptoms" must appear together as in germ-caused disease. In fact everyone's way of coping with problems and expressing distress (which is what I think mental illness mainly amounts to) is unique. Words like courage, intelligence and mental illness powerfully support the status quo: we tend to assume that they are simple descriptions of reality and do not notice that the words embody a particular explanation and evaluation of phenomena. They imply that largely socially-determined differences between people's behaviours, feelings and statuses are caused by concrete differences between individuals. For instance, the widespread belief in "intelligence" underpins our acceptance of informal hierarchies inside the WLM as well as elsewhere.

Success doesn't mean superiority

The belief in mental illnesses, as afflictions which more or less arbitrarily strike people down, allows the mentally "healthy" to separate themselves from the "ill" and to remain blind to the ways the structure of society oppresses and represses us all, driving each of us to varying degrees of "mad" behaviour. The "mentally ill" are kept largely out of sight and are seen as a strange, marginal, sub-group of the sick generally, instead of the tip of a larger iceberg of stress and unhappiness which is a symptom of the nature of our society. The successful groups, ie the powerful and the strong as well as the sane and together have always included more men, white and middle-class people, than women, Blacks and the working-class, for obvious reasons. The belief that the strong and successful are so thanks to their own superior merit actually conditions attitudes widely and deeply in this society – we feel bad about being in any way a failure, even when we remind ourselves that our circumstances have much to do with it.

This belief is central to western culture. It rests on an emphasis on individual free will, a quality which historically came into being and remains associated with the notion of "civilised", that is European, *men*. The successful entrepreneur *deserves* his sudden wealth and power, and is a 'better' man than his workers. This is mirrored in the continuing belief of most Europeans and white Americans that our countries are richer than the rest of the world thanks to our past and present merits – our ancestors developed technology and capitalism first and we continue to reap the benefits from this, as if by right. We all go along with this logic when we enjoy comparatively high living standards, subsidised by starvation conditions for most of the world. The respect felt for wealth follows the same pattern.

Why blame ourselves?

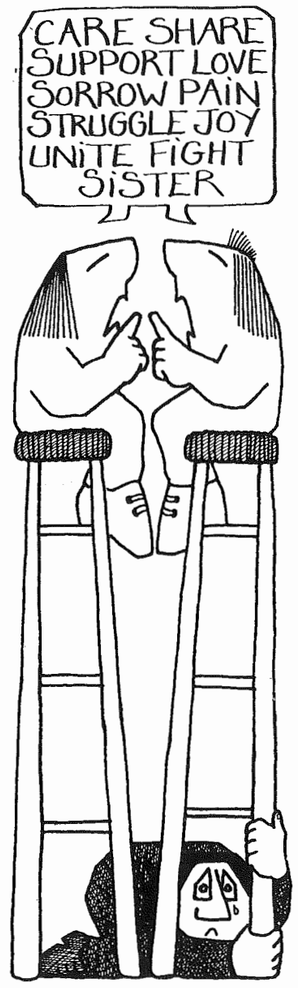
Few feminists would admit that they really blame other women for remaining stuck in some oppressive situation, or for being "mentally ill". Nor would they explicitly state that the tiny elite of efficient, bouncy feminists have become what they are, so different from many women, by their superior merits. But this blame and this credit are constantly implied in feminists' attitudes. For instance, some feminists have objected to any suggestion that diseases like cancer could be associated with stress or tension: they equate this with *blaming* women. But at conferences I have felt dismissed by women ignoring or glaring at me, as if looking untidy, unhappy, shy and lonely disqualified me from the ranks of *true* feminists.

If women are more often ill or untogether, whose fault is this? I am not saying that we are totally determined by social factors and have no choices, but surely the fact that more women than men are "mentally ill", is an indictment of the difficulties imposed on women by this patriarchal society? The fact is that twice as many women as men will enter a mental hospital at some point in their lives. One in twelve men, one in six of all women and one in four Black women. By denying some women's vulnerabilities we sharply limit our understanding of our own oppression (we all partly share these problems) and join forces with the male establishment such as doctors who do see certain problems as the fault of the patient, or trivial. Arguing from a basis of what some of us *want* to be true, for example, by suggesting that women are too sensible to have non-physically caused diseases, leads to reactionary conclusions – and leads us away from the truth which is necessary to us.

Feminists and "others"

Some of the effects of these attitudes can be seen in the way feminist groups work. The hostility to talking about our own problems and unhappinesses in the wrong place, such as the women's aid or rape crisis groups I have experience of, is part of an attempt to distinguish sharply between feminists and their "clients". It reflects the fear and scorn surrounding failure and right-offness. It is comforting to assume that any woman who becomes a feminist can step out of the system and join a ghetto full of happy and confident dykes who are all strong and wonderful, while the victims of patriarchy are all firmly at the other end of the phone line or whatever. We need to believe in ourselves, and a screwed-up feminist can be a reminder that there is no such absolute division between feminists and others, nor between sane and insane, but that we all have areas of insecurity and unhappiness which we tend to deny. Perhaps there is a parallel with the hostility women sometimes feel towards a raped woman. We don't want to identify with her, and resent being reminded that her position is open to us too.

Another reaction to unhappiness, which I have noticed in myself is a fear of the implicit or explicit demand for attention or support which one may not wish to give. This essentially unsolvable problem is eased, I think, by the recognition that every woman has the right not to give support, according to her needs. Bitterness towards the needy woman usually springs from the unwillingness to refuse to help – partly as a result of real caring, but it is also a product of the superwoman image and of the fear of putting oneself in the same category as the support needer, by admitting that you also have similar needs. Workers in supporting organisations especially can tend to assume they must be unfailingly on tap to help their *opposite* number. This is an insult to the support needers, who, clients or not, are never a necessarily different category whose need for support must be so vast as to oust any needs of the workers. All women need each others' help.



CATH JACKSON

This article was written in August 1984.

Writing Our Own History 6

A Rather Mean Cocktail Party

Georgina Ashworth, who founded and edits the journal CHANGE, has been involved with the United Nation's Women's Decade since it began in 1975. Here she talks with Diana Leonard about how the British Government gets away internationally with doing next to nothing on Women's Issues.

Georgina: The analysis that suggested the need for United Nations' action on women came in the first place from the work of the Danish economist Esther Boserup. She recognised that the economic patterns of most Third World countries were marginalising women. Also, the political structures and social administrations that were established and then left by colonising powers, such as Britain, were irrelevant to their context. They had actually caused greater poverty and powerlessness among women than had existed in pre-colonial times.

The formal origins of the Decade then came in a proposal to the Status of Women Commission of the United Nations from the East Germany-based Women's International Democratic Federation. This proposal took about five years to 'cook', with substantial support from women's groups in the UN and feminists internationally. 1975 was nominated International Women's Year, with an Intergovernmental Conference to take place in Mexico, with the objective of drawing up short and long range policy for governments to implement. This was set out in a *World Plan of Action* that same year.

It was agreed there should be a Mid-Decade Conference in 1980, to "review and appraise" governments' activities, and a final Conference in 1985. The Mid-Decade Conference took place in Copenhagen, although it originally was to have been in Teheran; and the final Conference is being held in Nairobi in June.

Between the conferences, two questionnaires were sent by the UN to governments to find out how they were implementing the World Plan of Action and what progress they were making. These emphasised throughout governmental responsibility for funding and consulting women's movements and organisations, so that the real obstacles to all the necessary changes could be defined and overcome.

It was intended that there should be structural change; changes in social relationships, in the distribution of time, money and power. But I'm afraid our own administration is really not very bothered. There is a belief that, since we have got the Sex Discrimination Act everything is fine and dandy in Britain. Our government does not see the objectives as anything beyond equal opportunities.

Diana: How did you personally get involved?

G: In 1975 I was working as Research Officer at the Minority Rights Group, and news about this thing called 'International Women's Year' came onto my desk. Later I was invited to a Decade seminar, sponsored by UNESCO in California, on the political participation of women. At the end of this I floated the idea of a series of pamphlets of background material of research on women in different countries.

This eventually became *Change* in 1979. We seem to be better known in Figi than in Fulham, and have never received any financial support from the Government.

By default, *Change* became the centre of Decade lobbying in this country. Like other people, I originally thought someone else would keep work on the UN Decade going here in Britain, but nothing happened. So in 1979 I began to agitate, because the Mid-Decade Conference was to be the following year. A questionnaire had been circulated to governments by the UN, basically asking "What have you done since 1975 to implement the World Plan of Action?". However, when I asked to see it to find out what had actually been said about the situation of women in Britain, they found they had lost it.

D: Who's 'they'?

G: Well, the Foreign Office. Technically it's the Foreign Office that handles everything to do with the UN. The section which handles the Decade consists of three people, and they usually appoint very new or lowly persons to it. In fact the UN Commission on the Status of Women is often known as the COW or SOW within the Foreign Office, which I find rather disgusting.

Realising that nobody was going to do anything much on an official level, shortly before the Copenhagen conference I got in touch with anybody I thought might be going, or might be interested in going. There had been no media attention and no discussions about what might be said, or expected of it. So in June 1980, *Change* held a small meeting in London.

Alongside each Intergovernmental Conference is an Informal or Alternative one. This was called the 'Tribune' in Mexico and the 'Forum' in Copenhagen (and Nairobi). The Forum has no bearing on the Intergovernmental Conference, except informally, but participants do not always understand the complexity of 'consultative status' and UN representation, and expect to be able to influence the Conference directly. It is too late, then. The Forum is where the ideas come from – but they have to wait five years to be injected into the UN.

All the response the informal British group got from our Government delegation in Copenhagen was a rather mean cocktail party. They felt: "This is our way of communicating with our Brits". Other governments had two or three briefing sessions every week, but ours was definitely no briefing session! Good briefing would have meant that people in the UK knew what the purposes of the Decade are, and what the Government is doing about it.

After the Copenhagen conference, the Foreign Office had a debriefing with some pomp and circumstance. But so what? The debriefing just said what they hadn't done. It was meant to satisfy us! It always makes me so angry when little crumbs are thrown and we are meant to be convinced that this is real power we are wielding, or influence we have managed to exercise. It's an insult.

Everybody tended to go to sleep after that. But I felt it was important that the contacts should be maintained because Copenhagen did germinate a kind of enthusiasm. There *were* eight thousand people at the Forum. Yes, the vast majority were middle class and had enough money to get there; but nevertheless most people who were there have a common understanding. It was a fundamental occasion. Everyone was changed by participating.

The issues in development were something that I thought were important to pursue and I sent a little questionnaire to participants. I had quite a lot of response and started the Decade Network. It was very informal, with a modest newsletter but hundreds of discussion meetings. It created space for visitors from overseas to tell us what they have been doing and for others to gain experience of speaking in smallish meetings. It was very educative.

Then, in 1982, the British delegate to the Status of Women Commission at the UN changed, and I went along to the new one and pressured her to do more. I said, more or less, "In 1985 there will be a major statement by the UK on what it has done for women – what are you going to do about it?" She suggested there should be a meeting. I proposed a *series* of meetings, in which a broad range of groups from the women's movement could be consulted, or introduced to the purposes of the Decade, and invited to produce their own policy statements.

That idea vanished through the colander, and when the meeting did take place, anyone who was under the age of 50 and not attached to a major organisation was someone I had met in the previous few days and told they had better turn up. In fact, a lot of the original proposals, which I like to think were quite radical, disappeared

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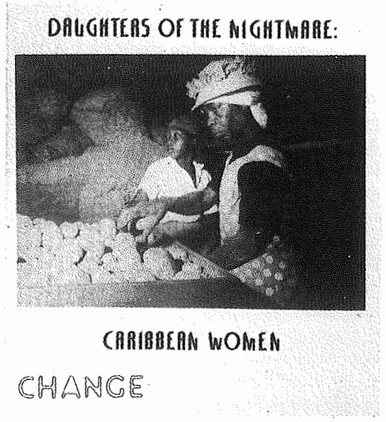


through the same colander. There was meant to be continuity, report back, and monitoring, so that there could be a sense of progress – of watched progress. They were the first to go. And the symbol of the Decade itself, which is the dove of peace, plus equality and the women's symbol, was refused.

D: Who called the meetings?

G: The Women's National Commission provided the Secretariat. The Commission belongs to the Cabinet Office, but it has tended to be regarded as rather marginal and has only recently taken initiatives of its own.

D: But the Commission does have a voice in the Cabinet Office?

G: Yes. Their original role was actually to offer women's opinion on White Papers and Cabinet level matters. That opinion is not very well-informed, so it presents no real challenge to the Government.

D: When were they established?

G: '68, I think. It was a Wilson idea. It was actually a recognition of the absence of power that women have, and the paucity of numbers in the House of Commons. It was intended to compensate for that. But, of course, it's not really satisfactory to compensate with something which is really powerless. It doesn't remedy the situation. The Commission has never been asked to find ways of getting rid of itself and replacing itself with something better. It just exists.

For the Decade, thirteen committees were drawn up to report on the situation of women in England. There was Employment, Health, Education (inexorably the most hands went up for that in Britain, given the middle class obsession with it). I think my only victory was in making sure there was a committee on Violence. And Media, International – which was for women in "international action". (A wry friend of mine remarked that would really be "international inaction".) Social Services, Social Security, and Taxation, all separately I've a list of chairpersons. (I think they would have called them chairmen if they could.) Legal Status – that's one that collapsed, along with Public Life and Policy.

D: The people who were brought in as the Chairs of the Decade Working Groups aren't part of the Women's National Commission are they?

G: No. The Secretariat was provided by the Women's National Commission, but the committees were separate. And their function, role and relationship with the Women's National Commission has never been clear. That's one of the reasons why they found it so difficult to work – because they did and didn't belong. The chairpersons were selected (against my protests) by organisation, like horses for a race, not for their qualities or experience.

Having made the initial proposal, I was very disappointed, and rather angry, that the principle existed but was so distorted, because as a consequence there were thirteen committees which have filled a space where something very much better should have been. They were largely from the traditional organisations; they tended to send along women who had an afternoon free, and didn't know quite what they were there for; and there were very few feminists involved, and those that were chucked it after a while. A lot of people felt it just wasn't worth while spending an entire afternoon trying to define what they were there for, because the terms of reference that I had proposed were not there.

But some people did remain and have tried very hard and have produced reports of varying quality. I have gathered from some quite conventional people that they were quite politicised by this experience of neglect!

D: What did you do next?

G: I thought the best thing to do would be to get together an alternative group who might produce *policy*, because the objective of the Decade was to create different ways of thinking about women in political parties, or in power, or in trade unions – all the areas in which women are marginalised. We therefore convened a small group of people, largely academics because they have the material, and we now have a book called *The Invisible Decade*. It makes proposals for policy changes, but it also argues *why* this invisibility exists in the UK.

Some of the overt reasons I have already given. It's just been mishandled. The Government doesn't want any women's issues to climb any agenda. I think they want to lean back on the Sex Discrimination Act. When the Equal Pay issue (which required reform of our Equal Pay Act) came across to Britain from the European Commission recently, for example, there was *tremendous* ill-grace towards it, and I doubt if most employers have the slightest clue about it. There is no will to put across information that creates change. Women's passivity must be maintained at all costs.

D: It was the British representatives who torpedoed the proposal for positive discrimination legislation in the EEC, wasn't it?

G: Yes, yes. A lot of European proposals have been circulating – again because of the existence of the Decade. An ad hoc committee was formed in the European Parliament. But it is tragic how little has come out of it. And the same negative approach comes up in different areas, in the development area too. The OECD, which is after all not the most radical outfit, eventually got round to guidelines on women in development. But the Brits watered down the provisions and delayed them. Quite why is difficult to know in this context, because Britain is such an insular country that it wouldn't have bothered most people. But the feet-dragging is really outrageous.

My biggest disappointment has been the absence of media attention, media outrage – even in matters relating to the media themselves. The second questionnaire that was circulated by the UN, which asked again, "What is the status of women in your country?", had 111 pages of questions. In the section on communications and media there were 5 pages of detailed questions. To these the British Government replied, "It would be inappropriate to answer, since we are a democracy and we have free media."

That smugness is both dangerous and false. But it is the biggest armour-plating that the Government has. They've not allowed themselves even to be defensive; not even to say "We might do it next year." It's this perfection, this assertion that "Everything is all right", and "Don't you dare, especially if you are foreign, come and criticise *us*!"

D: So you are producing your alternative account.

G: Yes. And apart from the book, a number of questions were tabled in Parliament in February (7th) about the conduct of the Decade, including whether the Government is going to publish the replies to the UN questionnaire. I've been nursing 12 MPs over the last six months, and most of them asked questions.

It's a slight scandal that it has to be one person, and a few moles in various places, who are prepared to do this work at their own expense. We've had no support from the Equal Opportunities Commission.

D: What's their attitude been?

G: Well, they have made small grants to an excellent Scottish group, the Scottish Joint Action Group, who have led the way. They are fortunate in that the Scottish Convention of Women came into being as an alternative to the Women's National Commission when devolution was proposed, and has remained even though devolution never occurred. Because of its timing, it is composed of younger, more radical groups. There wasn't the great need for the national organisations which has made the WNC rather static.

A Welsh group also got some money and has become, self-generated, the Welsh Assembly of Women. And one rather useless London-based group, which doesn't exist any more, and which frankly took no interest in the Decade (I know because I tried to persuade them to) has retrospectively, two years later, had their grant labelled as something to do with the Decade. I have complained to the EOC, as have some other ex-members of the group.

I'm not absolutely sure why the EOC hasn't taken any of the initiative, because the previous Chairman and Vice-Chairman were certainly conscious of the existence of the Decade. We made sure they were! But, again, I think it's this sense that the

Georgina Ashworth and Lucy Bonnerjea (eds): *UK Women and the UN Decade, 1976–1985*, Gower, 1985, £7.95 paperback and £14.50 hardback.

Decade is not relevant to Britain, because, as a former colonial power, we don't have anything to learn.

The questionnaire was filled in, not by the EOC, but by people within each Ministry. Fine. But the intention of the questionnaire was actually that *women's* groups and *women* themselves should be involved in the consultative process. It was intended to be educational in releasing ideas for the solution of the problems, not just a form to fill in.

D: Having heard Betty Lockwood (former Chair of the EOC) speak on occasions, it seems to me she operates on a belief that we get where we are by a process of modernisation and development and goodwill, rather than by any sort of nastiness or people pushing, or activists, or women *getting 'involved'.*

G: The prospects for Nairobi, where the final conference of the Decade will be held, are not entirely rosy either, for a number of different reasons.

Again, in the British context, unless there has been enough awareness churned up, the Government delegation will go and be able, quite peacefully, to project the smug image again. "We're still OK, because we have got this WISE (Women into Science and Engineering) bus travelling around the country." I have actually heard that ventured as a *serious* solution to the overall status of women! (It's just to keep the thing on the road, actually, because it's 1984's bus!) At the same time, they have occassionally taken on ideas and made them their own. The delegate to the Women's Commission at the UN recently made it sound as though Brenda Dean's becoming General Secretary of SOGAT (the print union) was the Conservative Government's achievement!

Central Office of Information for the Equal Opportunities Commission

Interest in Nairobi is probably much wider internationally than it is in Britain. It's sometimes rather unrealistic: the "It's going to be great because it's got to be great" syndrome.

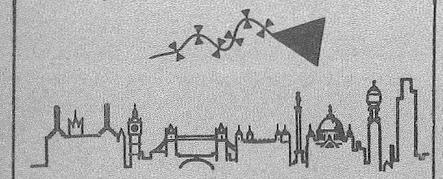
The Kenyan Government hopes it will be a money-spinner, rather than an embarrassment. And because Kenya is rather important strategically to Britain and the US, both are making sure that the US puts quite a lot of money into it – for that reason, not because *either* are committed to the woman question. Again the overall significance of international relations between governments is going to predominate over women's issues, or women's self-determination in relation to those issues. That's what happened in Copenhagen in 1980. I'm not sure it happened in Mexico in 1975, because everyone was much more optimistic, as were the governments themselves.

I find everything, in Britain especially, so *rigid*; so many age barriers. I get the sense that in other civil services, although they all have certain characteristics of bureaucracies, there are individual people who *do* network beyond their own environment. But I don't know where they are in Britain. It must be quite hard, actually, always putting across the Government line. But the tragedy of Britain is how hard it is for people to dissent. Yet we are told we live in a 'free society'.

D: Civil servants, you mean?

G: Yes. They have to be really cautious. They can't come back from international meetings, where they went as 'our' representatives, and say "Well, this was decided. What do you want us to do about it?" Mostly nobody here is any the wiser about European or UN decisions. We only hear about them if we make it our business to find out. And we do lack – and need – a real women's political lobby in this country.

All the campaigning for the Decade has been put on to the voluntary sector. The voluntary, ie without money, sector. So we have been sending arrows into what is in fact a Government fortress, which they can always allow to glance off their armour. □



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Wednesday

The Lesbian Co-ordinating Collective (LCC) of the Centre meets every Wednesday at 6.30pm in the Lesbian Meeting Room, 1st Floor, ALL lesbians welcome.

Thursday

DYKE RITE. 6.30pm, every Thursday, open collective producing an independent lesbian-only newsletter. Technical Resources area, 2nd Floor.

Lesbian-only "SMOKELESS ZONE" Disco, every Thursday: £1 waged, 75p consc. 8pm-midnight.

Saturday

Lesbian-only "SUPERDISCO" every Saturday: £1.50 waged, £1 concessions. 8pm-2am.

Sunday

9th June 2pm. Lesbian Open Meeting in the Lesbian Lounge, 1st Floor. (These meetings are held every second Sunday of the month).

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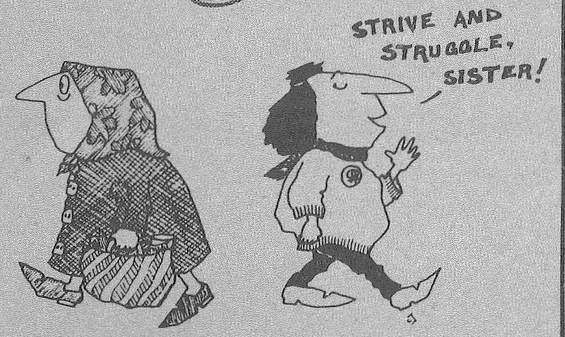

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No.6 Summer 1985

Letters: Help us make more Trouble and Strife; Co-parenting with men; Lesbian co-parenting; IVF an anti-woman technology 2

Other People's Revolutions? British Feminists and Northern Ireland *Teresa Thornhill.* 7

Silenced: Black women as domestic workers *Marianne Collins.* 15

Suffering from 'Equality': the lives and politics of Soviet women, a review *Bridget Foster* 17

Women who Dressed as Men: cross-dressing in the 18th century *Lynne Freidli.* 24

Coalition Politics: turning the century *Berenice Johnson Reagon* 30

Maps of Patriarchy: a classic review of Christine Delphy's *Close to Home* *Sigrid Nielsen* 36

Writing and Roaring: in search of the truly political feminist novel *Patricia Duncker.* 41

Even Superwoman gets the Blues: what counts as 'success' for feminists *Rosy Williamson.* 47

Writing Our Own History: A Rather Mean Cocktail Party. *Georgina Ashworth* talks to Diana Leonard about Britain's response to the UN Decade for Women . . . 52

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