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Teaching Lesbian Poetry *
By Elly Bulkin

In all that has been written about teaching women's literature, about classroom approaches and dynamics, there is almost no discussion of ways to teach lesbian literature. As a teacher, you hesitate to write about it in detail (if at all) for the same reasons you hesitate to emphasize it—or even discuss it—in class and out: the fear of losing your job, of being denied tenure; the fear that, regardless of your sexual and affectional preference, you will be dismissed by your students as "just a lesbian." You may be concerned that students who feel hostile, skeptical, or even friendly toward feminism and the women's movement will be irrevocably "lost" if you focus "too much" attention on lesbianism. You may feel doubts about colleagues' reactions to what you teach and how you teach it. There is also the threat that the validity of a hard-earned women's course, women's studies program, or women's center will be undercut, and funding jeopardized, if it becomes perceived as a "dyke effort."

If you are not a lesbian, your responses need to be explored before you can effectively teach lesbian material. If you feel uncomfortable with the subject matter but insist you have "no difficulty at all" with lesbianism, you may teach the inappropriateness of discussing (and perhaps even recognizing) such discomfort. If you begin a class on lesbian poetry by "just happening" to mention your married status, you may communicate your fear of being suspected a lesbian and discourage students from asking "too many" questions or seeming "too interested." If, on the other hand, you acknowledge the limitation of your understanding of lesbianism and make available information learned from lesbians and/or from current books by lesbians, you may encourage students' willingness to fill the gaps in their own knowledge. If you admit your own fears, stereotypes, and myths, and place them within the framework of a society that teaches homophobia, you will help weaken barriers between nonlesbian students and lesbian material. Although I do think that a nonlesbian teacher should teach lesbian writing in any case, to raise the relevant personal and political issues and to explore them most adequately require facilitation by a lesbian teacher, student, or guest speaker, by someone who has herself experienced the freedom and oppression of being a lesbian and who can share that openly.

II

When I speak in a classroom about lesbian poetry, I do so now as a lesbian guest speaker. I begin with two fundamental assumptions: (1) the poet's lesbianism is an essential, not an incidental, fact about her life and her work; (2) a discussion of lesbianism must focus not only on political ideas (what we think), but on feelings (how we act, what we say, how we live our expressed politics).

Students in one women's studies class were adamant about the "universality" of the selections in Amazon Poetry. Why, they wanted to know, had Joan Larkin and I called it "an anthology of lesbian poetry" (my italics)? Skeptical about my answers, they held to their sense of ready identification with the poets in the book; the fact of the poets' lesbianism, they insisted, was not sufficiently important for us to have stressed it. Other questions followed, more personal ones. I shared my feelings about the energy and time it took me even to be in the classroom; I recalled times when my anger at the need to deal with people's homophobia and general ignorance about lesbianism had been too strong for me to be able to do so.

I have almost never been the only lesbian in such a class. I run the risk, unless other lesbians in the class are vocal, of having my own perceptions and experiences applied to lesbians as a group. I emphasize that I am speaking as an individual. As a white, middle-class, comparatively young woman, I stress my obvious inability to speak for many lesbians who are Black, Latin, Native American, Asian American, working-class, and older.

The list of women studied included: Jane Addams, Susan B. Anthony, Martha Berry, Elizabeth Blackwell, Mary McLeod Bethune, Rachel Carson, Shirley Chisholm, Prudence Crandall, Marie Curie, Emily Dickinson, Emily Dunning, Amelia Earhart, Anne Hutchinson, Jenny Johnson, Helen Keller, Abby Kelley, Mary Lyon, Maria Mitchell, Deborah Moody, Lucretia Mott, Carry Nation, Annie Oakley, Eleanor Roosevelt, Sacajawea, Margaret Chase Smith, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Tubman, and Emma Willard.

*Earlier versions of this article, with a reading list, were published in Radical Teacher and College English. A much-expanded version is available from the Lesbian-Feminist Study Clearinghouse, Women's Studies Program, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260.
Audre Lorde

After I began my second meeting with the same class with a twenty-minute reading from *Amazon Poetry*, we moved to a deeper level of dialogue. Most of the students had managed to "forget" Audre Lorde's "Love Poem"; others had felt too uncomfortable at its explicitness to initiate a discussion about it:

And I knew when I entered her I was high wind in her forests hollow fingers whispering sound honey flowed from the split cups impaled on a lance of tongues on the tips of her breasts on her navel and my breath howling into her entrances through lungs of pain.

My reading seemed to give students "permission" to share their fears and confusion. Our point of departure was the visual image of two women loving each other physically. We spoke of the Western tradition of heterosexual love poetry with its nearly total preoccupation—when sexually explicit—with intercourse. One woman said that because she was just starting to explore her own sexuality, references to anything sexual embarrassed her. Another said that because she couldn't identify with either woman in the poem, she had great difficulty relating to it.

Finally we began to discuss what makes lesbianism so threatening. A woman remembered a disparaging, upsetting remark made the day before by a male friend who had seen her with *Amazon Poetry* in the college library. A second commented that she found it hard to overcome her feeling that I shouldn't be "bothering" her about lesbianism. We spoke of the homophobia in the denial of our own and others' lesbianism. As an example, we looked at Susan Sherman's "Lilith of the Wildwood, of the Fair Places":

women women surround me images of women their faces I who for years pretended them away pretended away their names their faces myself what I am pretended it away.

I connected my own past "liberalism" on sexual/affectional matters ("Anything people want to do is OK with me as long as it doesn't hurt anyone") with the ready acceptance of lesbianism that had been verbalized during my first meeting with the class by women who were now admitting to much more complex feelings. By now, the limitations of such "liberalism" seemed clear. I connected it to a tendency to see selectively, to homogenize, to focus on women's shared experiences to the exclusion of those profoundly influenced by sexual and affectional preference, as well as by race, class, and age.

I stressed that the experiences of lesbian and heterosexual women are different. Blurring the distinctions only denies the reality of many women's lives. Understanding that is a way into ourselves and into the poetry. I read aloud, from *Beginning with O* (1977), the final section of Olga Broumas's "Sleeping Beauty":

City-center, mid-traffic, I wake to your public kiss. Your name is Judith, your kiss a sign
to the shocked pedestrians, gathered beneath the light that means stop in our culture where red is a warning, and men threaten each other with final violence: *I will drink your blood*. Your kiss is for them
a sign of betrayal, your red lips suspect, unspeakable liberties as we cross the street, kissing against the light, singing, *This is the woman I woke from sleep, the woman that woke me sleeping.*

I wondered aloud whether someone who was not aware of the extent to which lesbian and heterosexual women lead different lives could appreciate fully the impact of these lines. It is the daily oppression, not the pink triangle and the Nazi concentration camps (in which up to a quarter of a million lesbians and gay men were executed): simply two women who cannot,
without shock, disgust, possible physical violence from passersby, show affection on a city street. "I am a pervert," Judy Grahn writes, "therefore I have learned to keep my hands to myself in public." 2

I linked my own experiences, my own anger, with that of the poets. I do not want my own reality to be distorted by someone's insistence that my life is "just like" that of a heterosexual woman. We ended the class with my reading Adrienne Rich's words:

Two friends of mine, both artists, wrote me about reading the Twenty-One Love Poems with their male lovers, assuring me how "universal" the poems were. I found myself angered, and when I asked myself why, I realized that it was anger at having my work essentially assimilated and stripped of its meaning, "integrated" into heterosexual romance. That kind of "acceptance" of the book seems to me a refusal of its deepest implications. The longing to simplify, to defuse feminism by invoking "androgyny" or "humanism," to assimilate lesbian experience by saying that "relationship" is really all the same, love is always difficult—I see that as a denial, a kind of resistance to read and hear what I've actually written, to acknowledge what I am. 3

III

As teachers, we make choices which, consciously or not, reflect such denial. I wonder, for example, how many women's studies teachers are using as texts Rich's Diving into the Wreck (1973); Poems: Selected and New, 1950-1974 (1975); or the Norton Critical Edition, Adrienne Rich's Poetry (1975). Do they choose to teach poems from these earlier books to the exclusion of the more recent, explicitly lesbian poetry in The Dream of a Common Language (1978)? How prepared are they to explore this change? How do they feel about the poetry of this fifty-year-old lesbian who has raised three sons?

How do they feel, too, about learning that Muriel Rukeyser agreed to participate in the lesbian poetry reading at the 1978 MLA Convention and was prevented from doing so only by serious illness? What will they make of one of the opening poems of The Speed of Darkness (1971), "The Transgress":

in the revelation
thundering on tabu after the broken
imperative, while the grotesque ancestors fade
with you breathing beside me through our dream:

bed of forbidden things finally known—

Will they go back and read—and then teach—the book's opening poems as celebrations of coming out?

Do they ever choose to teach the poetry of a working-class lesbian poet like Judy Grahn? Her poems hardly fit into the traditional academic concept of what constitutes "good poetry," yet, in classes where I have read aloud sections of "A Woman Is Talking to Death," students have spoken repeatedly of reacting emotionally to the lesbian oppression Grahn describes. For students who do not, for the most part, share that oppression, poetry that can transcend that gap in experience is, I think, especially important to teach. For students in women's studies classes who think of feminism and lesbianism as affecting only middle-class women and of poetry as the province of the well-to-do and formally educated, Grahn's writing destroys more than one erroneous assumption.

How, too, do women's studies teachers choose to approach the additional issues raised by the work of lesbian poets who suffer further oppression because they are Black, like Audre

The photographs accompanying this article were kindly supplied, with the poets' permission, by the Women's Writer's Center, Inc., at Cazenovia College. Founded in 1975, the Women's Writer's Center offers a unique full-year educational program—including writing workshops and tutorials; courses in feminist literary history, criticism, and aesthetics; and independent study projects—for the training and support of women writers of varying backgrounds. The 1980-81 program will include Olga Broumas, Rita Mae Brown, Judy Grahn, Audre Lorde, and Marge Piercy as visiting faculty. For more information, write to: The Women's Writer's Center, Inc., Williams Hall, Cazenovia College, Cazenovia, NY 13035.

Photographs by Marian Roth.
Lorde and Pat Parker; Native American, like Paula Gunn Allen; Hispanic American, like Lorraine Sutton; or Asian American, like Willyce Kim and Barbara Noda? If homophobia throws up one formidable barrier between lesbian poetry and the nonlesbian reader, racism adds another that is at least as high for the non-Third World reader—and teacher—of Third World lesbian poetry. Those of us who are white teachers of this poetry need, I think, to be prepared to approach directly the issue(s) of racism, even as we recognize the complexity and difficulty of doing so.

Teaching, for example, a poem like Audre Lorde's "Power," about the acquittal of a white policeman in the fatal shooting of a ten-year-old Black boy, can provoke a range of student responses that need to be confronted on more than one level. Faced with students who argued that "anyone" could have written this poem, I have stressed the importance of reading it as a statement by someone who is Black, and therefore identifies strongly with a boy shot by a policeman who "said in his own defense/’I didn’t notice the size or nothing else/only the color’. . . ." 4 Faced with white students who have found it difficult enough to read Lorde as "just" a political Black poet and by Black nonlesbian students who clearly have preferred to focus exclusively on her Black identity, I have stressed that she is also a lesbian.

IV

The case for teaching lesbian poetry can, of course, be allowed to rest on the academically acceptable belief in literary quality. Teaching it does, after all, expose students to much of the "best" of contemporary women's writing. But teaching it as lesbian poetry moves us to shakier, less "academic" ground. In its conscious risk-taking, in its affirmation of our diversity, exploring lesbianism and lesbian poetry as vital parts of women's lives and literature constitutes one facet of what the National Women's Studies Association has characterized, in its Constitution, as women's studies "at its best": "a vision of a world free not only from sexism but also from racism, class bias, ageism, heterosexual bias—from all the ideologies and institutions that have consciously or unconsciously oppressed and exploited some for the advantage of others."

Elly Bulkin is an editor of Conditions, a magazine of writing by women with an emphasis on writing by lesbians, and a member of the Editorial Board of the Lesbian-Feminist Study Clearinghouse.

NOTES