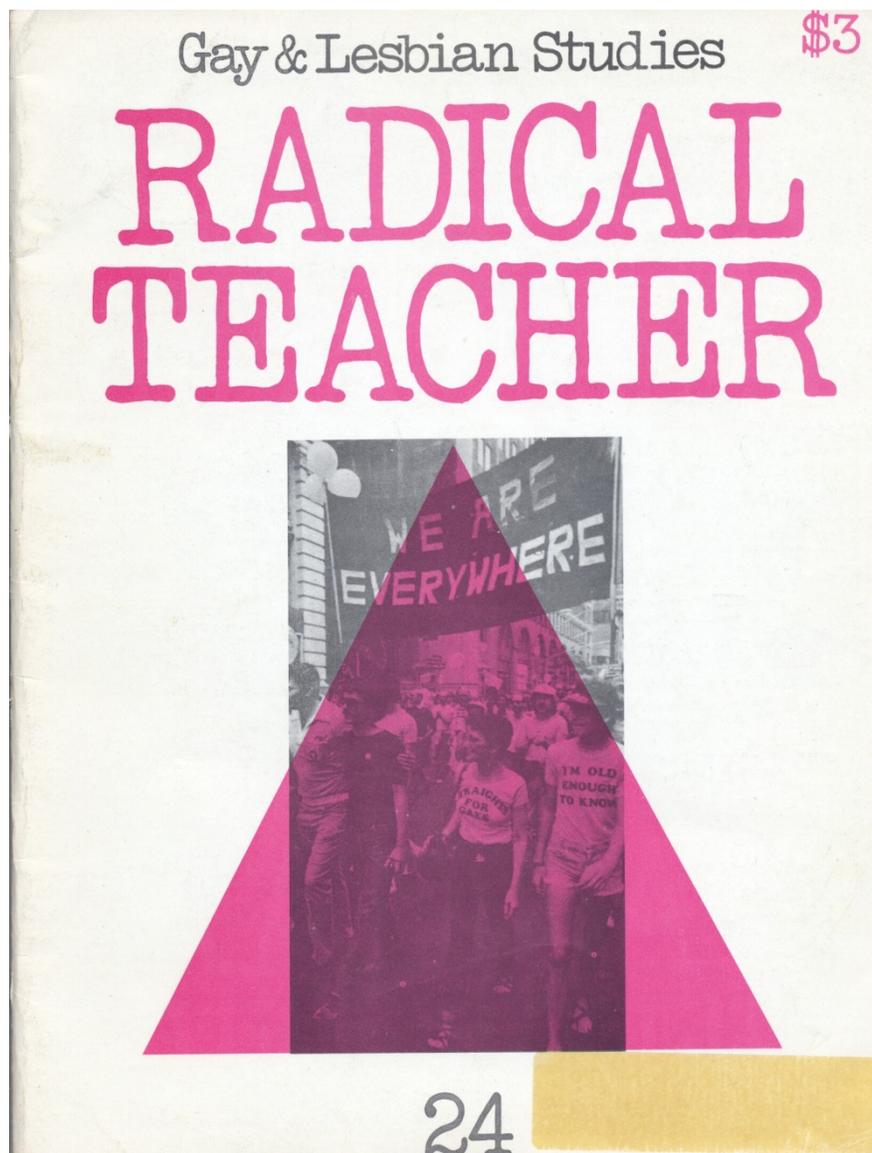


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Lesbian Literature: A Third World Feminist Perspective

by Cherrie Moraga and Barbara Smith



"A Baseline From Which to Build a Political Understanding: The Background and Goals of the Course."

Barbara Smith: I'd taught Black women's literature, interdisciplinary courses on Black women and talked about Lesbianism as an "out" lesbian in my "Introduction to Women's Studies" courses, but I really wanted to do a Lesbian lit course. Lesbian literature had never been offered by the Women's Studies program at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, although the program is almost ten years old. There was a gay literature course that had been co-taught by a gay man and a lesbian, but its orientation was quite a bit different from what I had in mind.

Cherrie Moraga: Lesbian literature had been taught a number of times at San Francisco State through the English department. My major motivation for wanting to teach the class was that I thought it was the perfect place to integrate a political perspective that centered on Lesbians of color. The other motivation came in response to taking other women's studies classes and Lesbian-related courses that were so completely white and middle class. I wanted to teach a course that covered what I thought was missing from those classes.

B: I had no intention of teaching what I called on the first day of class "Rich White Women." The Renee Vivien and Natalie Barney types and shit. No interest whatsoever, because they do get taught, and some of them even get taught in straight literature classes.

C: The other thing is that in gay literature classes what is usually taught are books like *Rubyfruit Jungle* and whatever stuff is as mass-market as can be. Not necessarily feminist. And then, in a Lesbian course taught by a white woman, you would get racist and classist selections by default.

B: One major goal was to familiarize the women who took the course with the writing of women of color. The other goal was for them to get a grasp of how the issue of racism in the women's movement connected to them. I felt that it was impossible to talk about the literature of women of color without talking about the reality of racism also.

C: One of my goals was actually to teach a course on the theory of oppression through a feminist perspective. I wanted to talk about how Lesbians function in a positive and visionary way for a feminist future, for social change. But at the same time, I wanted to talk about lesbianism as oppression and to talk about homophobia. Regardless of their color, most of the women in the class had lesbian oppression in common, which gave them some sensitivity to racial oppression and class oppression. Some of the students didn't know they were oppressed. But there would be a source of oppression to work from.

"People Came Around": Our Students

B: Most of my class were white women and Lesbians. There were some white straight women and one Black straight woman, but no Lesbians of color who attended on a regular basis. I did everything possible to inform women of color about the class. I talked about this difficulty to the students from the beginning and I think at a certain point they thought I was saying that I didn't want them to be there, but I think that they began to understand what the significance was of having Third World women actually in attendance as we got into the subject matter. University of Massachusetts in Boston is an urban university that basically serves working-class and lower-middle-class students. The composition of the class did not reflect the racial composition of the campus. Not just Afro-American women, but Latinas, people from the Caribbean, Asian women, all kinds of people go there. But what began to be obvious is that the risks involved for a woman of color to take a course called "Lesbian Literature," whether she was a Lesbian or not, were high, particularly if she was a Lesbian. Most of the people who took the course were in their early twenties.

C: My class was also predominantly white. There were four women of color officially registered and, fortunately, often Third World women in the community would attend. The effect of the course? "People came around," as you would say. They had little or no exposure to the works of women of color, and they got some. In the first six weeks of the course, however, there was a great deal of tension in the room, particularly between the white women and Third World women. I experienced this tension as well. Many of the white women in the room didn't know that they'd have to be dealing with racism when they came to a Lesbian lit course. Finally, they began to comprehend that the way I was defining "Lesbian Literature and Feminism" meant that they had to be antiracist.

B: Despite what I consider to be the success of the course, there were times that I felt alienated in the situation of virtually all white women. In all my teaching experience, I am constantly dealing with this contradiction of the powerfulness of being a teacher against the powerlessness of being Black. Most white university students have never had a Black teacher. That, in itself, is a mind trip. The teacher is in a position of power. I think it does a trip to white students' heads to have a Black person – a Black woman in particular – in that position over them when their general experience of Black persons in the society is in situations where Blacks are subordinate to them.

C: If not subordinate, then nonexistent.

B: Sometimes I have the feeling in the classroom that the look in my white students' eyes is, "What is she going to do next?!" People have so many *negative* images of Black people. And teaching (particularly on a non-university level) has many *positive* connotations. A teacher is someone who *takes care*. In other words, their connotations of "teacher" are different from their connotations of "Black."

Another thing is intellect. To have a Black person in a position of intellectual power over white people is UNKNOWN: You know? I mean how could the Black person know more than they do? AHHHHHHHHHHHHH: (laughter) How could a Black person be teaching them anything? Just like I say in the introduction to *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*: "How could somebody who looks like my maid or my fantasy of my maid teach me anything?"

I'm supposed to know everything. I'm white... (sigh, pause) Oh God save me.

C: My being a light-skinned Third World woman vs. being Black meant that in my class there was less of a specifically racial or color dynamic happening. But since my being Chicana formed my politics, which determined the makeup of the course, they felt at a disadvantage. I think they wondered, "How can I learn something if I wasn't born into it?" when all along we, as working-class and Third World women, have been required to learn *and* teach outside of our own point of reference.

There's nothing like a passionate lived connection when you're teaching a subject.

"The Political Significance of Being a Dyke": The Design

C: I began the course trying to talk about the criteria on which Lesbian literature is examined. I used your definition of feminism. To paraphrase: *Feminism that is not about freeing all women, which means working-class women, women of color, physically challenged women, et cetera, is not feminism but merely female self-aggrandizement.* We took some articles like Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan Wolfe's "Toward a Feminist Aesthetic" and an article by Bertha Harris, "Notes toward Defining the Nature of Lesbian Literature" and contrasted those against Elly Bulkin's article "Racism and Writing" and your article "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." If Lesbian feminists are doing criticism then they are responsible for doing actively anticlassist, antiracism work, using anticlassist and antiracist criteria for examining those literatures.

Did you discuss Lesbian feminist aesthetics much?

B: No. We hardly talked about aesthetics at all, because to me aesthetics is talking about what makes something pretty as opposed to what makes something effective. We certainly talked about effectiveness.

C: When we discussed aesthetics we did so in relation to color and class. This led us to examine the white middle-class bias of what is considered good art in the first place.

B: We did a section in the course called "Forerunners, Prefeminist Lesbian Writing." I had an opportunity to show a slide show on Lesbian pulp fiction.¹ I wanted people to have an understanding that Lesbian literature existed pre-feminism. We had quite a debate over whether *The Black and White of It*, a recent book by Ann Allen Shockley, was feminist writing or not. I think that this was one of the first examples of how people's effort to be nonracist made it difficult for them actually to be critical of what we were

discussing. In their eagerness not to be negative about a Black woman writer's work, they used different standards to approach it. In other words, because she was Black, they felt they couldn't say she wasn't explicitly feminist.

C: In my class we spent some time talking about Lesbianism outside of a feminist framework. Instead of using pre-feminist literature, however, we used some articles about specific sexual questions among Lesbians now. I felt that the majority of the women in the class came out as Lesbians through the feminist movement and had very little understanding of what it meant to be gay without the support of a woman-identified political movement. In some way, they had been sheltered from viscerally dealing with plain old queerdom. I felt that it was critical that a lot of them come to terms with that.

In contrast, I also included a section that was about Lesbian feminist visions of the future. This has been a heavy genre in Lesbian feminist writing. All the major books coming out around 1978 had a section that talked about a feminist vision in some way. Like the third section of *Gyn/ Ecology*, which was supposed to be about Lesbian ecstasy. And then the last section of Susan Griffin's book *Woman and Nature*, and the last section of Adrienne Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language*. And also Sally Gearhart's *The Wanderground*, which is a feminist fantasy. These white writers were producing a body of literature that was talking about where we should go from here. My problem was that I could never get behind any of them (with the exception of Rich, who incidentally titled her final section "Not Somewhere Else, But Here," with the emphasis on the "Here"), and I didn't understand why. So in class we used *The Wanderground* as a way to seriously examine how that vision was in some way actually exclusive. It was not an all encompassing vision, but was directed only to a particular group of women that could indeed feel liberated by the guidelines she had set forth. One of the best parts of the class was actually when Sally Gearhart came in and we could talk with her face to face. This then brought up the issue of a Lesbian feminist writer's commitment to speaking out of her reality but at the same time with a sense of inclusiveness.

Judy Grahn, for example, is very clear about how her class has actually affected the kind of writing she does in terms of form and content. And has also affected her politics. The pivotal point of the whole class was talking about the question of ethics by focusing on "A Woman is Talking to Death." That one long poem became the breakthrough for lots of women to really understand, not in an analytical, theoretical, or abstract way, the political significance of being a dyke. Many white middle-class feminists write ethical poetry but you can't get underneath it. It's not concrete. Judy's stuff in a very daily way helps you see how indeed she is up against all the forms of oppression and how they all collapse in on each other.

B: We talked about how the first moral dilemma that she poses is should she help out a Black man. Besides accountability, violence, accidental violence, and the white-boy stupidity that got the motor cycle rider killed in the first place, race is up front. And when was the poem

written? 1973? Before most people were even thinking about racial accountability as a feminist issue.

In my class we talked about the irony of the fact that the people who were really asking practical ethical questions were perverts – the people who were talking about having enough food for people to eat, trying to end race hatred, war, what-have-you. I think that's even different from so-called revolutionary male or non-feminist women writers who might ask those very questions but whose perspective is ruined by homophobia.

C: A recurring theme that comes up in Lesbian literature – which is to me the heart of why I would bother to teach the course – is some kind of personal conviction that something between women could be different than what it has been before. In the works of Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn, and Adrienne Rich you can see this. Somehow maybe it's possible that between women racism, hunger, etcetera could be overcome.

B: As Adrienne says, "The decision to feed the world/ is the real decision. No revolution/ has chosen it. For that choice requires/ that women shall be free."²

C: And along the same lines, the theme that goes through "A Woman is Talking to Death" over and over again, is that of touching. Because she touches women she's a pervert, and yet the reality is that the true perversion or the true indecent act is when she didn't touch women.

Judy Grahn says, "Yes I have committed acts of indecency with women and most of them were acts of omission. I regret them bitterly."³ There's the same kind of ethical frame of reference in Audre Lorde's work. Take a poem like "Between Ourselves," in which she writes, "I do not believe/ our wants/ have made all our lies/ holy."⁴ She refuses to use race as an excuse for imposing other forms of oppression. It's all rooted in very concrete stuff. That's the critical difference.

B: White working-class women are almost the only white writers who are appropriate to include in this kind of course.

"Our Ideas Precede Our Means": The Materials

C: We had to use handouts because we don't have bound books. One of the problems typically brought up about why women of color and/or Lesbians of color aren't really discussed in women's studies courses is that there isn't any available material. It takes a real invested interest and commitment to find the stuff. Because it's actually there, but it's in feminist and Third World small-press form and published randomly in periodicals.

B: It's also much easier to find, at this point, collected writings of Black Lesbian writers because of publications like *Conditions: Five* than writing of women of color who are not Afro-American.⁵ It would have been easier to teach a course using only Black Lesbians, but it would hardly have been comprehensive. Often white women in particular think only in terms of Black and white and think if they've

added a few Black women to a course they've done what's expected of them.

The hardest to find book which dealt with racial issues was actually by a white woman writer: *The Changelings*, by Jo Sinclair, written in the 1950s. We had only three copies of the book to pass among thirty people. Because of that process we ended up talking about the book last as opposed to where it actually appeared on the syllabus. And that was a really great book to end on since my class was almost entirely white. Although Jo Sinclair never publicly identified herself as a Lesbian, the book was written from a Lesbian and feminist perspective, and it talks about issues of race from the perspective of a Jewish woman. In other words, it brought together many of the themes of the course because it was talking about race, but from a white woman's perspective. It was Lesbian literature in that it focused upon a friendship between a Jewish girl and a Black girl.

"They Taught White Men, So Why Can't They Teach Black Women": The Third World Lesbian and Women's Studies

B: There are virtually no women of color who are out as Lesbians who are in a position to teach courses in universities. The people who have the politics don't have the jobs, or the credentials. The people who have the credentials and the jobs don't have the politics.

C: But what about the white women who are already teaching there?

B: The white women who are teaching there – they definitely don't have the perspective in the main because if they did women's studies would have a whole different look than it does. I don't think it's trashing to say that white women have been extremely limited by their whiteness and their class backgrounds, because every text, every piece of tangible evidence that you pick up indicates that. In other words it's not just an impression, it's a reality. You can document it. All you have to do is go into your women's studies section at your university and see what's being taught.

C: I think that on our various campuses, there has been at least some effort to begin. There are some white women teaching who do some Third World women's studies and are trying to do some substantial integration in the curriculum. But it's very slow.

B: Another thing is that there's little Lesbian literature taught anyway. Of all the women's studies courses taught, it might be the one taught least, because of the issues and risks involved. This brings up the issue of whether you're intending on making it in the university system. I think it's significant that the two people who taught *these* Lesbian lit courses had *no* interest whatsoever in having careers in the university.

C: So we didn't have as much to lose.

B: Yeah, in other words we could be Third World Lesbians, teaching Third World literature, teaching Lesbian literature. We didn't expect a future.

C: Right.

B: What really makes me angry about straight white women's studies teachers in general is like how they can never see where women of color and lesbians would logically fit into their subject matter. Women in my classes would come back and talk about other women's studies courses they were taking simultaneously, and they would complain bitterly about the narrowness of a women's studies course that the very semester before they might have taken on face value. And I think they only had this consciousness by having been involved in my course at the same time.

C: I think basically the mentality of most programs is we will teach white middle-class, heterosexual women for all our courses *except* in the Lesbian literature course where we will teach white lesbians and in the Third World women's course where we will teach straight Third World women. And that's it (laughter).

So if you happen to be a Third World Lesbian, forget it. Because there's not going to be one course that you could totally relate to. Your Lesbianism gets dealt with in an all-white atmosphere and your color gets dealt with in a straight context. Then they want to know why there are no Third World women or Third World Lesbians taking women's studies.

And certainly you're not going to hear anything about Lesbianism in any other department.

B: Right, unless it's abnormal psychology.

C: And what you find in ethnic studies programs is probably not going to be very much about women.

B: Another factor is that we are active as feminists. I don't see teaching as political work, but certainly my political consciousness affects what I think is important to teach. Do we really believe white women can teach these classes? Because my feeling is, they can.

It's not about them teaching it as we would teach it, but teaching it as opposed to all that alien crap that they are teaching.

C: If white women could teach white-boyism for so many years, why couldn't they teach Third World women's stuff? After all, they aren't white men, anymore than they are Third World women. They could particularly teach Third World women's literature because literature opens you up

into the mind of another person. They taught white men, so why can't they teach Black women?

B: The reason that one thing appears easy and the other hard is that confronting the experience of women of color calls white women's lives into question in a way that the writing of white boys just doesn't. They can remain aloof because they're not having to examine their relative power in a relationship to poor and Third World people, nor their own role as collaborators with the very people who oppress them.

C: The point is that if you do teach a course that involves a Third World woman's perspective, a lot of the assumptions that you are making in the course are going to be turned around. I think this is terrifying to teachers because to bring in another body of information would mess up their whole system.

What Lesbian feminists need to be responsible for is producing a body of literature that makes people have to get up and move. Why use the word "feminist" if you're talking about a body of literature that rationalizes people's complacency, that prevents the reader from ever having to deal with the woman down the street....

B: With race, class, and color....

NOTES

1 This slide show by Maida Tilchen and others has never been distributed.

2 Adrienne Rich, "Hunger," *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 13.

3 Judy Grahn, "A Woman is Talking to Death," *Collected Poems* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), p. 125.

4 Audre Lorde, "Between Ourselves," *The Black Unicorn* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 113. "Between Ourselves" was originally published in 1976 by Eidolon Editions, Point Reyes, California.

5 With the completion of collections like the *Latina Anthology Compañeras*, edited by La Colectiva Latinoamericana (in progress) and *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Watertown, Massachusetts: Persephone Press, 1981), works by Lesbians of color from many racial/cultural backgrounds are becoming increasingly available in print.

"Lesbian Literature: A Third World Feminist Perspective," a dialogue by Cherrie Moraga and Barbara Smith, appears in a longer form in *Lesbian Studies*, edited by Margaret Cruikshank (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1982).



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