

# The Women's Studies Review

The Ohio State University

Volume 7 No. 6

Center For Women's Studies

November/December 1985

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## A Gathering of Spirit: Writing and Art by North American Indian Women.

Edited by Beth Brant

(Sinister Wisdom Books, 1984)

By Judith Kent Green, Department of English, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

This is a nourishing book, providing sustenance for both women who identify with Native American culture and those who do not, but who are aware of their ignorance and the inadequacy of the standard curriculum to enlighten on this subject. One of the benefits of the women's and civil rights movements has been to make us recognize that the established canon in literary study reflected a socially dominant point of view rather than simple universal excellence, and consequently those of us who teach are engaged in a search for alternate and enlarging visions. A Gathering of Spirit is one such resource (1).

Necessarily diverse, A Gathering of Spirit includes work from women of various tribal and regional backgrounds. Some names, such as those of Paula Gunn Allen, Anita Endrezze-Danielson, Joy Harjo, Wendy Rose, and Anna Lee Walters, may already be familiar to some, but there is a plethora of new talent included. As one looks through the poems, stories, essays, journals, letters, and drawings, what is striking is the combination of extreme individuality (such as is revealed in the drawings by Jaune Quick-To-See Smith) and common thematic threads. The struggle to achieve identity and to become the women they want to be, the prevalence of the grandmothers, the story-telling quality of all the genres used, the presence of the land, and the sanctity of the ordinary recur throughout, as do dispossession, the Trail of Tears, failure, alcoholism, and incarceration. Neither polemical nor nostalgic, the book provides provocative political commentary as well as a longing for wholeness that society at large insists upon splitting; splitting because one is a "half-breed," splitting because one is ethnically "other," splitting because one is lesbian.

When a reader first picks up the book, she may experience a bewildering multiplicity of genres and styles and assume that a random collection, something resembling a magazine, is before her. Indeed, since this is an expanded version of a double issue of the quarterly Sinister Wisdom (July, 1983), I imagine many people read it that way, and, without question, A Gathering of Spirit may be leafed through with profit. But greater patience and consecutive reading, it seems to me, reveal Beth Brant's subtle thematic organization, designed to open up one idea several ways and then lead into a different but somehow related one, with waves of repetition through variation allowing for recognition of what came before.

I can discern about twenty such groupings, but I shall sketch here the workings of only a few. The first poem of the collection, "Artifact" by Edith Purevich, suggests that the "shards of things" which allow one to "touch a fragment of their days" can stand as a metaphor for all we are to touch in the following collection. However, we immediately take warning from the next poem, "Owl Woman" by Amber Coverdale Sumrall, which says "guard your secrets/bury your treasures well,/your knives, your crystals,/your feathers and shells \_". Even well-trained anthropologists gleaning shards and treasures from the earth and its peoples have misunderstood and damaged. Insensitive readers of this anthology are dangerous, too. Several pages later, a similar note is sounded in Terry Meyette's "Trading Post-Winslow Arizona." Here, tourists "buy history in a blanket/family tradition in a squash-blossom necklace."

However, the early pieces quickly leave this combination of elegy, ambivalence, and warning. Examples of story-telling exhibit cultural differences of perception sometimes emphasized by structural means. When Leslie Mormon Silko addressed the English Institute, she appeared to suggest that what was true of Pueblo perceptual and aesthetic structure might have some validity for other Indian perspectives (2). In A Gathering of Spirit, several consecutive pieces, although not Pueblo, seem to be illuminated by Silko's explanation of the structure of Pueblo expression as resembling "a spider's web—with many little threads radiating from a center, criss-crossing each other." Paula Gunn Allen's poem "The One Who Skins Cats" is a re-vision of Sacagawea's story, but not the story invented by white men, not the one celebrated by "suffragettes," not the one deplored by some Indians. Allusions to the Lewis and Clarke expedition criss-cross the poem, but finally are not central. Survival is central. Two voices, one sounding traditional, one sounding slangy and sharp, express this challenge to conventional history. Confusion about identity is also the subject of Mary Moran's "Thanksgiving Dinner During Pelting Season (1957)," a two-part poem which alternates images of the preparation of mink skins and turkey, church "history" about Indians, and an "American" Thanksgiving. Linda Hogan's short story "New Shoes" follows, and, although web-like in another way, as we learn of Sullie's thoughts circling on the shoes her daughter may have stolen, we also begin to feel the impingement of white stereotyping more profoundly in the person of Mrs. Meers, the rental agent. The destructive presence of white males builds to a crescendo, however, as we read Charlotte DeClue's poem on the rape of Monahsetahand, then about the ultimate threat in four pieces about nuclear weapons. In several places, drawings also carry through the theme, so that Nan Benally's "The Rug of Woven Magic" is next to a poem and drawing by Chrystos about a found loom. A photograph of Dorothy Haye's sculpture "Woman's Head" follows her "A Short

Autobiography." In sum, although there is some unevenness of quality between the various pieces, the text as a whole is beautifully integrated.

As for explicitly feminist messages, two stand out: Marilou Awiakta's "Amazons in Appalachia" and Kate Shanley's "Thoughts on Indian Feminism." Awiakta quotes Attakullakulla, "a Cherokee Chief renowned for his shrewd and effective diplomacy," when he was negotiating a treaty with a delegation of whites that comprised only men. He asked, "Where are your women?" Implicit in the question, Awiakta explains, is another: "Where is your balance?" The lack of reverence for all leads the Cherokee to "intuit the mentality of destruction." In 1983 Awiakta finds herself asking the same question of "the Congress, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission..." Kate Shanley's article is about her growing awareness that Indian women at the 1983 Ohoyo Indian Women's Conference on Leadership eschewed the designation "feminist." Although her examination of the reasons for this focuses on Indian women's experiences, she works her way towards concluding that "feminism becomes an incredibly powerful term when it incorporates diversity—not as a superficial political position, but as a practice." A Gathering of Spirit should enable us to work towards exactly that incorporation.

1. For an academic discussion of this point, see Arnold Krupat, "Native American Literature and the Canon," in Robert von Hallberg, ed. Canons (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 309-335.

2. Silko's address, "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective," is transcribed in Leslie A. Fiedler and Huston A. Baker, Jr., eds. English Literature: Opening Up the Canon, Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1980 (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) 54-72.

## Reflections of a Heritage: Response to Ojibway Heritage. by Basil Johnson

(Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976)

*By Karen NoLand Giles, Center for Equity in Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (OSU Alumna).*

My language and cultural background as a Native American have made it difficult for me to interact with many aspects of American mainstream society. My Indian enculturation emphasized very different aspects of life. I have always sensed that I was peculiar; I have always had a relationship with plants, animals, and the wind that set me apart from my peers. Fortunately, a few years ago I discovered Ojibway Heritage by Basil Johnston which has proven to be of great personal worth to me. It stimulated introspection, and, as I read on, I began to isolate some specific incidences of my past and to give them some additional consideration.

In our backyard in the far corner of the fenced-in yard, I found an industrious spider and her ongoing collection of entrapped flies. As a child, not understanding the cyclic, integral nature of things, I took great care every morning all summer long to release those flies with a stick. I would gently maneuver the stick and the web until the fly could be set free. In their place I would stick bread crumbs and small pieces of lettuce, hoping they would satisfy the spider's appetite. After school resumed in the fall, I sat in the classroom, squirming and worrying about those poor flies stuck forever, unless I could get home in time. I never dared to tell anyone about my anxiety.

I made up a game called "I Found Magic." I taught the other kids in the neighborhood how to play it and, believe me, we spent endless summer hours entertaining each other. The gist of the game was this: you were to clear your mind and then walk all over the yard or fields with your arms outstretched. I believed that one's spirit would lead you until you found a "magic spot." You then crouched down, parted the grass, and gently scratched the earth until you found "it." There was

always something magical there! Then we each proceeded in turn to tell stories about our find. For example, the tiny pink stone I found inspired a wonderful story about a baby eagle who dropped this precious stone from its beak while flying over during a thunderstorm.

As a child, my best-kept secret was my cherished sacred bag and its contents. It is interesting to me now how much I valued that bag and what it held. In those days I had a strong emotional and physical dependence on the bag for my safety and well-being. Nevertheless, it was a well-kept secret. The bag itself was actually the pocket lining from one of my father's discarded coats, tied up with a leather shoelace. But the contents: a tooth (I was never certain whether it was a dog's tooth or a mastadon's), a rabbit's foot, some white sand traded from a friend, some odd rocks, feathers, and a Canadian stamp. My sacred bag is not a secret anymore; I get it out from time to time and share it with my friends.

I habitually used to stick dried beans or corn kernels into my Mother's flower pots. I would excitedly watch their miraculous birth as they broke through our Mother Earth. How I loved this! In my egocentric world, I felt "I" had given that plant life. Only me and my Mother celebrated.

One hot, summer afternoon, while sitting on the backporch with my legs dangling over the edge, a fat, fuzzy bumblebee came buzzing around. Unafraid, I sat motionless, hoping the bee would favor me with a stopover whereby I could get a firsthand, upclose look at it. He obliged; he gently paused on my knee and proceeded to dance around--totally unafraid. I stared in awe at that beautiful creature. It was at that moment that I realized the understanding between us. To the bee I

communicated my gratitude for not stinging me, for permitting such a rare visual experience. The bee communicated to me its gratitude for trusting it, "as most mortals do not," it said. It likewise was interested in investigating me closely. It was a wonderful experience and exchange, all made possible by trust and mutual respect. I told my Grandfather this story; he didn't laugh.

It has become apparent to me that I do in fact view and interact with my environment

very differently than those from the American middle class. As a child I felt isolated by my differences. I did not have bicultural parents to help me bridge the gap between what I was and the world in which I was forced to live. After thirty years, I have rediscovered my spiritual and cultural essence. The Ojibway Heritage inspired me to re-evaluate, to dredge up those long buried pains and feelings of inferiority. It feels soothing and comfortable; I understand things better now.

## Working Your Way To The Bottom: The Feminization of Poverty. By Hilda Scott

(London: Pandora Press, 1984.)

*Lisa Ransdell, OSU, Department of Sociology*

In this short volume, Hilda Scott introduces the recently popularized concept of the feminization of poverty and discusses several distinct areas of recent feminist scholarship having some bearing on this phenomenon. Her treatment of the issues is inclusive and informative, yet too brief and superficial to offer any new insight. Each chapter in the book could easily be expanded into a larger volume. In some cases, in fact, this has been successfully accomplished—by other authors.

Scott begins by exploring academic and governmental definitions of poverty in relation to each other. According to Scott, the subjective nature of measures of poverty not only obscures the visibility of its extent in Western capitalist countries, but also obscures the fact that women the world over are suffering the brunt of poverty and will continue to do so, even if somehow there should be a global economic upswing. Although people in developing countries may be seen as suffering more often from absolute poverty (that is, lack of the basic necessities essential to sustain life), women in every nation are to be found at the bottom. Female

poverty cuts across the more visible influences of class, race, nationality, economic region, and ethnic group.

The national and international statistics Scott supplies to document this situation are shocking and, given the sheer number of them with which Scott provides her readers, numbing as well. Women perform two-thirds of the world's work and receive only ten percent of the world's income. Women perform ninety percent of the unpaid work of the world. In the U.S., two out of three poor adults are women. Among those over 65, two-and-a-half times as many women as men live in poverty. The number of female-headed, single-parent families rose by one third in the 1970s (which accounts for the growth in official poverty rolls), while at the same time, poor, male-headed families decreased by eighteen percent. Black women in the U.S. exist at the absolute bottom of the economic ladder, with a median income in 1979 of \$4,900 among those who were gainfully employed. These wages are more similar to those of white women than to those of black men—in the same time period the median income of white women was \$5,500 and that of black men

was \$8,500. Both of these figures, however, are in contrast to the wages of white men, which were \$14,300.

The reasons for the female monopoly on poverty in the U.S. are women's major responsibility for childrearing, their unpaid labor in the home, and the structural feature of extreme occupational segregation by sex, along with its component features of sex discrimination and sexual harassment. The author cites a 1981 study which points out that of all the possible personal and social causes of poverty, half apply equally to men and women, including such factors as lack of education, inadequate skills, poor health, low work commitment, racism, and so on, while half apply to women only. These causes for the disproportionate female share of poverty are exacerbated by the fact that recent government cuts in aid to the poor have been especially harsh in programs which benefit women, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children and day-care services, as well as the fact that future trends in employment are likely to work against women.

Threats to Affirmative Action programs mean that the meager ranks of women who infiltrated higher-paying male occupations are likely to diminish further than they already have, and the withering away of the mass industries and the computerization of white-collar jobs are likely to lead to a narrowing of the job categories traditionally employing women. Such jobs will be redefined as part of the masculine domain. One recent example of this phenomenon provided by Scott is that over a three-year period at AT&T, 22,000 women lost jobs due to automation, while 13,000 new positions in these areas were obtained by men. In addition to such cases as this, the political rhetoric of the current administration actually blames the "unnecessary employment of women" for the problem of unemployment generally. All of the above accounts for the poverty of women who are wage-earners. Scott deals with the ramifications of women's unpaid work in the home as a separate, but related, phenomenon. The two add up to her conclusion that "women work their way to the bottom."

In developing nations, where women are the poorest of the poor, technological innovations and development programs introduced by the West have manifested Western notions of family and work which have had the effect of undermining sources of income and status traditionally held by women, further adding to the material hardships they suffer. Because the new technologies are being taught primarily to men and are defined as part of the male domain, the separation of male and female economic activities is made more formal and more distinct, further diminishing women's economic power.

The first third of Scott's book provides a convincing, if condensed, argument in support of a world-wide trend of the feminization of poverty, a trend she defines as the complex of forces that keep women in an economically precarious situation in relation to men, while simultaneously increasing their economic responsibilities. The latter two-thirds of the book, in which Scott assembles a theoretical explanation for such a trend, does not fly as well, probably because condensation of the evidence of material reality is easier to digest than is condensation of the theories that account for that material reality, particularly when those theories are neither unified nor one's own.

In one brief chapter, entitled "Was It Always That Way?," Scott deals with the whole of women's history. In another, "Why Men Run the Machines," anthropological evidence for the manner in which male hegemony over technology developed is presented. In still another, "Woman as Other," the ideological justifications for male power and the feminist critique of this is rapidly reviewed. Finally, the inability of current economic theory to explain all of this is lamented. There would not be such a problem with the brevity of her work if Scott were better able to unify all of these ideas, or if she came up with a new perspective for viewing women's economic situation. Her conclusion, offered in a more general manner than those of the feminists whose work she reports, is that poverty needs to be redefined, along with economic policy and women's role generally. Nothing new

here.

As it is, the book reads more like a good review of the recent feminist literature on female poverty. There is some value in this,

and the book thus serves as a good introduction to and documentation of the problem, but it is not particularly illuminating about the circumstances which give rise to it or about solutions for eliminating it.

## **Sharing the Same Bowl by Claire C. Robertson.**

(Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984)

*By Isaac James Mowoe, Department of Black Studies, OSU*

"This study of a long-settled urban population, the Ga of Central Accra, Ghana," Claire Robertson writes, "will explore change in women's access to the means of production through analysis of shifting socioeconomic structure in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries". Through an examination of "changes in the organization of trade, resistance, marriage, inheritance, fertility, education, and support of dependents," Robertson discerns a pattern of increased autonomy for the Ga women of Ussher Town in Central Accra, and a corresponding decrease in their power, because, she asserts, they lack access to resources. Robertson describes the Ga as a stratified community with two groups. The first is female with an unfavorable relationship to the means of production; the other is male, with what appears to be a more favorable relationship to the means of production. The portrait which emerges is that of the economically marginal female and the economically central male. Significantly, Robertson's data, both quantitative and qualitative, support her conclusions.

Quite apart from the results of the surveys which she conducted in 1971/72 and in 1977/78, the comments of her interviewees, particularly those of the women who constitute her "4 Portraits," vividly attest to the primacy of the male in the socio-cultural order of the Ga. In view of this, the economic centrality of the Ga male would seem to follow as a matter of course. But does it?

To be sure, the economic circumstance of the Ga woman as revealed by this study is far from ideal. But does it follow, in the nature of a zero sum game, that the economic circumstances of the Ga man is correspondingly better? While Professor Robertson does not so state, the implication is present. But would the conclusions of a similar study with the focus on the economic circumstance of the Ga man be significantly different from those of this study? Could it be the case that the economic status of the Ga, man and woman, is a function of the vagaries of the national economy of Ghana and the imperatives of the international economic order rather than gender? Robertson appears to answer in the affirmative. In her words, "The results, then, of a weak attempt at socialism have been the further privileging of multinational corporations at the expense of indigenous businesses, the creation of a number of capital-absorbent parastatal corporations that extract profits for the benefit of the elite, and the giving of monopolistic advantages to certain male-subsidized privileged women, who are not usually traders by avocation".

Questions about the impact of national and international economic factors in the economic welfare of Ga women and men aside, Robertson has achieved the objectives which she identified at the beginning of her work. Had she been able to explore in more detail the role of the international economic order, this would be an even better book. Worthy of

special mention is the wide array of data which Robertson gathered for her study. Simply put, the data are impressive. The work comes close to a tour de force and is an important addition to the growing literature

on women and society in the Third World. It is indubitably one of the very best books I have read in the field of African studies in the past year.

## **With the Power of Each Breath: A Disabled Women's Anthology.**

**Edited by Susan E. Browne, Debra Connors, and Nancy Stern**  
(Cleis Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1985)

by Susan Koppelman, St. Louis, Missouri

*To bring together women's experience of disability with feminist theory requires a thorough reexamination of both. ...All feminist issues are encompassed; all knowledge about disability must be re-evaluated (1).*  
– Barbara Hillyer Davis

With the Power of Each Breath contains 58 essays (ranging from half a page to 17 pages) separated into eight chapters, or categories of concern. The contributors' ages range from 13 years to 93 years. The style and structures of the essays vary widely—from professional research and analytical papers to passionate arguments to poems, letters, journal entries, short stories, "slice of life" drama, and mood pieces. The political sophistication of the book's contributors varies – that is, the contributors range from an attitude of political indifference to radical feminist consciousness, like Emily Levy's "How the Rhino Got Its Flaky Skin," a piece about her environmental illness (which should lead us to make changes – to ban cigarette smoking, for example – in all those spaces we call "women's space," changes in our conventions and our festivals and our classrooms and our personal lives), "Disability, Sexism, and the Social Order" by Debra Connors, and "Nicaragua: A Victory for Disabled Women" by Joan Tollifson (2).

Much of the writing is pedestrian—clear, unobtrusive, plain as Jane Eyre. But some of the writing is breath-taking, the evident literary craft exciting, such as "The Field is Full of Daisies and I am Afraid to Pass" by Maureen Brady, "My Last Legs" by Suzanne

Beaucher, "Inheritance" by Pennyota Ahladas, "Like the Hully-Gully But Not So Slow" by Anne Finger, "Seizures" by Max Dashu, "Tale of a Pretty Woman" by Cheryl Wade, "This Body I Love" by Deborah S. Abbott, "October" by Nancy Stern, and "A Leg to Stand On" by Amber Coverdale Sumrall. Many of the women who wrote these pieces are first, before they are anything else, writers. They may be disabled writers, black writers, lesbian writers, but they are writers before anything else, the way Flannery O'Connor was a writer before she was chronically ill with lupus, the way Ellen Glasgow's writing self preceded her deaf self, the way Alice Walker is a writer before she is a woman blind in one eye.

All of the writing seems to have been edited with an honest concern for linguistic and stylistic accessibility – and yet each contributor's voice is separate from all the others: each woman's voice is intact. And the women writing these essays, writing about what they have figured out about reality from their own experiences and deep, longing thought ARE intact. ARE WHOLE. These women are whole. And that is the first thing the not-yet- disabled or chronically ill community has to learn about us. We are whole.

The book represents women from a wide range of racial and ethnic groups. And the widest possible range of life-styles is represented: lesbian, heterosexual, celibate, partnered, communal, traditional nuclear familial and single parent families. Women with an equally wide range of disabilities are included. The structure and editing, the original conceiving, and the final shaping by the editors make it both exemplary and teachable.

There are some controversial choices of articles in this collection, such as Carol Schmidt's "Do Something About Your Weight," an essay by a fat woman about various surgical self-sacrifices and emotional and psychological self-lacerations and abuses she underwent before she realized there was nothing wrong with her. For many years I have heard a heated-but always whispered-debate about whether or not fat women could, with "political correctness," be included among the disabled. The editors of this book, by including this essay, are making this controversy public and taking a stand (3). By including this essay they also make clear the statement implicit and explicit in the essays or stories of other women in the book who are variously disabled: there is nothing "wrong" with us. This is how we are.

The editors have also included essays by women with psychological disabilities and a transcription of an interview with a woman who has been labeled all her life "mentally retarded." The choice of each of these essays represented a stand on a political question. Can physically disabled, chronically ill, mentally ill, and developmentally disabled women make common cause? The arguments on both sides are passionate, well-reasoned, based on personal experience and political analysis, and important. The editors refer only obliquely to these controversies in the disabled community in their introduction, and so a reader unsophisticated about disability issues might not know she is reading a book shaped by women taking political positions on important questions the readers don't know exist.

The essay on "Reproductive Rights and Disability" by Ann Finger is the clearest statement of the complex practical, emotional, and political dimensions of the issues involved in the simultaneous struggles for ALL women's rights, including the right of disabled women, to make free and informed choices about their reproductive lives and the right to life of disabled women.

The book will make you laugh at times because so many of the women in the book have developed their talents for humorous perception and communication and because much that the women choose to write about is genuinely funny. The book will also make you cry and gasp with anger and shock, and will shock you by its anger. I don't think the anger of any other of our constituencies has shocked us like this—not the anger of lesbians, not the anger of black women—but the anger of women with disabilities is shocking to many because not only is anger an "inappropriate" feeling for "nice" women, but it is not just doubly but multiply inappropriate for "cripples" and "victims" of chronic illness. The shock so many temporarily "abled" feminists feel when they confront the anger of feminists with disabilities and chronic illnesses who are angry at temporarily able bodied feminists because of the lack of concern for, sensitivity to, and commitment to accessibility for all women is evidence of the fact that they share in the most disabling aspects of the lives of women with disabilities: the disabling ATTITUDES of ablist society. The refusal to recognize disabled and chronically ill women and to learn to identify with us as sisters with more to give to than to get from temporarily able bodied women is infuriating the way racism and anti-Semitism are. The trouble with the social diseases, i.e., racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, ablist, etc. is that those afflicted are not the ones who experience the worst symptoms of the diseases. We fight social diseases to save ourselves from their ravages.

And there is also the shock of recognition: the concerns of the women writing many of the essays in this book are "normal" despite

differences temporarily able-bodied women assume exist between themselves and women with disabilities and chronic illnesses. In this respect, the most telling sections are "This Body I Love - Finding Ourselves" (eight essays, including one by a wheelchair jock), "Becoming Mothers - Raising our Children" (four essays, including "Parenting" by JoAnn LeMaistre, with some of the finest, most common sensical writing about parenting I have ever read by anyone), and "Finding Our Friends" (four essays, including a "first date" scenario that Everywoman will identify with).

The absence of difference is brought home sharply by the final essay - a transcription of some of the stories shared among themselves by a group of women living in a Canadian convalescent home - most of them over eighty. The implicit message in the inclusion of this essay, "Women's Reminiscence Group," (because the editors did not seek out old women who had had disabilities or chronic illnesses for a long time, whose disabilities preceded their agedness) is that the various realities of physical limitations are the fate of all of us who live; it is the direction that survival takes us.

In addition, there have been several books, articles, and resource materials published by and about women with disabilities and chronic illnesses in the last several years. All those I have seen are useful: the May, 1981 special issue of off our backs on women with disabilities, Images of Our Selves: Women With Disabilities (Routledge & Kegan, Paul, 1981, ed. Jo Campling), Yvonne Duffy's 1981 All Things Are Possible, a book about sexuality and orthopedically disabled women (A. J. Garvin & Associates, P.O. Box 7525, Ann Arbor, MI 48107), Building Community: A Manual Exploring Issues of Women and Disability published by the Women and Disability Awareness Project, Educational Equity Concepts, Inc. 440 Park Ave. S., NYC 10016 (4), the recent special issue on "Allergies and Other Disabilities" of Broomstick: By, For and About Women Over Forty (Vol. VII, No. 3-4, May-July, 1985), and various articles, soon to be collected in a book, by Barbara Hillyer Davis including the one cited above, from

### Frontiers. (5)

With these earlier published resources and this new book, With the Power of Each Breath, feminist teachers now have sufficient and appropriate materials for a semester course in women's studies in which the conjunction between and among the disability civil rights movement, the lives and concerns of feminists with disabilities and chronic illnesses, and feminists involved as primary care-givers or as significant others, and the theory, practice, history, and issues of feminism can be made clear and used to illuminate women's struggle for liberation from the patriarchy. The course would best begin with sensitivity training sessions conducted by Connie Panzarino or others trained by her.

It is also important to note that With the Power of Each Breath, like all books published by Cleis, is available on tape from the Womyn's Braille Press, P.O. Box 8475, Minneapolis, MN 55408.

Instructors choosing texts for a syllabus might remember that texts available on tape or in braille make their classes more accessible to many students from whom women's studies courses are not any more accessible than any other course in the patriarchy.

### FOOTNOTES

1. Davis, Barbara Hillyer. "Women, Disability, and Feminism: Notes Toward a New Theory. Frontiers 8 (1984) 1-5.
2. There seem to be no right-wing and/or Christian fundamentalist disabled women included. I don't know whether that was a conscious political choice by the editors, whether they had, among the three hundred works contributed for their consideration, some essays by such women that they rejected, or whether it was a self-selecting group and the editors confined themselves to choosing from what had been sent them rather than going out and commissioning essays from

women belonging to specific groups they had made an editorial decision to include. The editors discuss briefly some aspects of the process of their work together and what they write is absorbing and instructive in the best sense, but I would have enjoyed knowing more. I suspect, for instance, that at some active or passive level they made a definite decision not to include the perspectives of those women.

3. I, as a fat, chronically ill feminist, am about to take a fence-sitting position on this issue by including Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression edited by Lis Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser, with a Forward by Vivian Mayer, Aunt Lute Book Company, P.O. Box 2723, Iowa City, Iowa 52244,

a powerful and important book on this subject in a footnote instead of in the bibliography in the first paragraph. But I am including it. I am having a real hard time with this issue.

4. The work by Adrienne Asch and Michelle Fine of the Women and Disability Awareness Project on teaching people about the issues of disability by directing them towards their own feelings and ideas and experiences with those issues is classic leaderless (or community led) consciousness raising. The guidelines are included in the cited materials.

5. The Feminist Press has a collection coming out soon, too: Female and Disabled: An Anthology of Art and Literature edited by Marsha Saxton of the Boston Self-Help Center.

## **The Poet's Job: To Go Too Far and**

(Columbus, Ohio: Sophia Books, 1985)

## **I Name Myself Daughter and It Is Good.**

(Columbus, Ohio: Sophia Books, 1981).

## **Both Texts Edited by Margaret Honton**

*by Sue Lape, Department of English, The Ohio State University*

These two economical volumes of poetry, so different in scope and intention, raise some provocative questions about the nature of poetry itself; in particular, its purpose (why write it?) and audience (who is it for?). This may seem like an elementary approach to a subject so intensely invaded with rhyme, meter, line endings, and metaphor, yet it is necessary for readers to shed preconceived "notions" about the nature of poetry if we are to work ourselves into the heart of these two volumes. Both The Poet's Job and I Name Myself Daughter are compiled and edited by Margaret Honton, whose clear vision and strong sense of purpose are evident throughout each book.

The Poet's Job came into being as a result of a suggestion made by a member of the National Association for Poetry Therapy, that

there was a need for a collection of poetry which "expressed the connection between poetry as an art form and writing as a therapeutic experience." In fact, the original title for the book was Writing a Good Poem is Good Therapy. Honton's immediate goal in publishing the collection was to "provide original source material for interns in medicine, arts therapies, for practicing psychotherapists, and for clients who have become aware that writing is 'good for the soul.'" She hoped also, of course, to encourage poems that might be considered "works of art" as well. There is, in fact, some very good poetry in The Poet's Job, but one is reluctant to apply the term artful to most of the poems, which, in truth, must be viewed as "works in progress." What prevents so many of the poems from becoming fully realized comes from what Honton herself has noted: that over

two-thirds of the poetry is focused on personal relationships, and in particular, the writer's own intense preoccupation with him – or herself. Understanding and accepting Honton's admonition to "receive each poem on its own terms," however inverted and obscure to the reader it might appear, is not enough to save the book from becoming less than it could be. Ironically, in The Poet's Job, the writer in most cases did not go far enough.

Linda Flower defines the difference between the material generated within the writer's own mind, the dialogue she has with herself, and what is finally given to the world (what emerges onto the printed page), as Writer-Based and Reader-Based prose (1). Though we are talking her about poetry, the terms are equally applicable. Writer-Based poetry is a "verbal expression written by a writer to him or herself and for him or herself...It reflects the associative, narrative path of the writer's confrontation with the subject." In contrast, Reader-Based poetry is a "deliberate attempt to communicate something to the reader." Writing good poetry, then, means to transform the "natural but private expressions" of the writer into a "structure or style of communication adapted to" and, therefore, understood (without additional comments or footnotes) by the reader. Many of the poems in The Poet's Job, though they often demonstrate and even resonate vivid imagery, powerful metaphors, and authentic creative energy, do not finally make that transition between the poet's inner dialogue and the reader. The poems are still very much self-involved, still struggling through the discovery stage of writing. Ironically, the "accounts" (corresponding comments by the poet which illuminate a poem's meaning and process for the reader) often seem richer in substance than the poems they reflect upon. There are, of course, exceptions to this. Evelyn Hickey's "Subtext" is a clearly realized poem about the breakup of a marriage that needs no "subtext" to explain it. Grace Fraften's "Mother to Daughter" is painfully honest in confronting the mother-daughter-father triangle; it, too, stands on its own merit as does "The Cain," another striking confrontation with the absorbing yet

disarmingly ambivalent connection between mother and daughter. It is amazing, the amount of repressed anger mothers feel toward daughters, and it is certainly a healthy sign for both when that rage can be expressed. Still, one wishes that more of the poetry in this volume, whatever the nature of the poet's inner conflict, had such a clear sense of purpose and audience, such an awareness of the reader, as these few poems do. Certainly, there is anger enough in I Name Myself Daughter, a collection of poems that are both "feminist and spiritual in nature," but the poets here seem somehow to have transcended it. One of the obvious ways they have done so is to focus on a subject or object outside of themselves. Catherine Callaghan's "Vision of Sor Juana" is a good example.

Sor Juana de la Cruz was born illegitimate during the seventeenth century in what is now Mexico; she transcended, or, more appropriately, transformed the "accident" of her birth by acknowledging and then atoning for her "mother's sin" which was, of course, to have been born female and to have borne a female. Callaghan takes Sor Juana, and the reader, with passion and precision, through the recreative process until both emerge, at the end of the poem, released from inner pain and turmoil, "proud as the dawn's light." One can almost see the feminine shape of the poem evolve onto the page, because the writer is so determined to communicate the female experience to the reader. Another fascinating and moving poem, clearly realized in both the writer's and the reader's mind, is "On Seeing A Girl on a Bicycle Hit a Dead Skunk" by David Holt. Here the poet has climbed out of his own persona, his inner world, and projected himself into the world of an eleven year old girl, with deep involvement, yes, but also with the precision of a carefully crafted poem that literally pulls the reader into the girl's experience. There are other poems in I Name Myself in which the male poet assumes, with verisimilitude, the perspective if not the actual persona, of a woman: "Leftovers" by David Tipton is one of them. Here, it seems to me, a real transformation is taking place, perhaps even health-giving therapy. What a marvelous opportunity for both poet and reader, to work,

not only through personal conflict, but through misunderstanding about what it means to be female, or male, in this culture. In fact, nearly all of the poets in I Name Myself have lifted themselves out of the darkness of self in order to emerge into the light, onto the page; their poems, not their comments about the poems, carry the weight of that journey and its discoveries. That is what is missing in The Poet's Job: the re-working, the re-visioning, the returning again and again into the chaos of the unrealized text until the poem is not simply brought raw onto the page, but shaped and polished until the reader cannot miss its meaning. Again, accepting Honton's purpose in publishing poems only for those involved in poetry as therapy, one must still expect that the work, the poem itself, will express the message. I admire the fact that writers are

struggling, in both books, to confront and understand the anger and resentment that has kept women silent for so long, silent and furious. It is important, however, to do more than explain our pain to ourselves; poets who are women in particular must write what we know, not only feel, as courageously and clearly as we can for all readers, not just other women, therapists, husbands, daughters. "First learn," Sor Juana tells us, "then write." Enter into the dialogue with the self, but emerge from that inner struggle; bring what is discovered into the light for the reader to understand as well.

1. Flower, Linda. "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing." *College English* 41 (Sept., 1979) 19-37.

## **Pumping Iron II: The Women, A Film by George Butler**

*by Lucretia Knapp, OSU, Department of Photography and Cinema*

Pumping Iron II: The Women, by its mere title, which implies a macho attitude toward beauty and the body, alienates a number of would-be viewers, specifically feminists. I was therefore surprised to discover that the film's momentum and underlying theme and question are basic to feminism: what constitutes a woman in such a foreign sphere as the world of body builders? And while this sphere does seem quite separate from most women's everyday reality, it is uniquely connected to a general battle against social prejudice and inequality.

The film, directed and produced by George Butler, documents curious slices of the lives of four women – Bev Francis, Rachel McLish, Lori Bowen and Carla Dunlap – as they prepare for and eventually compete in the Caesar's Palace World Cup for Women in Las Vegas. The film is subjective and personal; taking the women's point of view, it emotionally engages the audience and negates the idea that this sport presents women only as object or spectacle. Instead, the audience

comes to know the perseverance of each woman, the philosophy of the sport, and the individual attitudes of the various women. Because this film is many viewers' only source of information about body building for women, its personal perspective gives a special density to our understanding of a sport which may otherwise seem to be a soulless display of form.

The opening of the film is a slow pan of a beautiful "Amazonian" mountain range in Australia. This slow motion sequence ends as it reaches the reclining form of Bev. The technique instills a mental, rather than filmic dissolve, whereby the woman blends into or becomes the land and the land becomes the woman. The resulting conjunction of power, nature, and woman is further accentuated by a distant view of a water dam. The orgasmic flow, the roundness of the basin from which it topples and flows is a metaphoric continuum. Bev is initially, then, represented in images of power, and of the natural and mythic. Also, Bev is presented as subject, which is atypical,

since films generally present woman as objects of desire.

From Bev, the camera travels upward, scanning two power-lines which visually pull the viewer into the harsh, neon-cosmetic plastidome of Las Vegas and introduces Rachel as the epitome of woman as spectacle. Rachel lies seductively within a strange tanning contraption, an altar of sexual sacrifice. The executions of the shots are technically superb; they display woman as sexual object, but not to degrade women. Rather, these shots are meant to contrast with and emphasize the portrayal of Bev. The electric blues, the tight confinement of space in the shots of Rachel sharply differ from the natural lights used to film Bev. A cold, bluish tint seems to pulsate from Rachel's body. The goggles which protect her eyes from the adorning radiation add to the eeriness of this "Frankensteinian" creation. And, as is typical of pornographic images of women, the body is broken apart and fragmented into pieces of objects, machinery for men. The film's opening thus polarizes Bev and Rachel.

The women's top powerlifter, Bev, arrives in the United States with a tremendous task: she must transform herself from powerlifter to bodybuilder. She drops thirty-five pounds through dieting and rigorous body conditioning. An astounding metamorphosis takes place. Bev's workouts are visually stimulating and far more memorable than the final footage of the competition. Bev displays an uncanny centeredness, a precise mental and physical joining. Her determination inspires and moves viewers beyond any expectation.

With an engaging personality, Bev wins over the various audiences, the film's viewers as well as the competition's spectators. Her warmth and humor and the comradery she displays with her competitors reveals the genuineness and gentleness of this woman. But due to the awesome build of her body and

because she is more androgynous in appearance, rather than conventionally beautiful, as Rachel is, the question of her femininity becomes central to the competition.

Rachel, the 1980 U.S. Women's Bodybuilding Champion, and a likely candidate for the title at the Caesar's Palace competition, proves to be an agitating egotist throughout this film. She is dismayed by Bev's acceptance into the competition and believes that because Bev has gone beyond "acceptable limits" of women's body building, she is not feminine. It is both Rachel's discriminatory accusations and her degrading representation of woman that make her such a very unsettling personality. Throughout the competition, she attempts to physically outdo Bev, but since this cannot be done by flexing her muscles, she accentuates herself as a sexual display.

Because of the stir that Bev creates, it is obvious that this very determined and independent woman is considered "unique," but somehow her striking difference cannot be translated into "unprecedented" – which was a key word in publicity for the competition – nor into the acceptable. At the end of the competition, Bev, though she is the most qualified woman there, receives eighth place while the crowd boos and hisses. Rachel is awarded second place and Carla Dunlap, a traditionally attractive woman who is also muscular, but not to the extent that Bev is, is named the winner.

At the conclusion of the film, in a hotel room with close friends, Bev phones out for all the foods she has denied herself during training. Animated, she tries to lift the spirits of her friends. And then, during a brief moment, her smile is forgotten and a very sensitive voice says, "But the crowd knew I won, and that's all that matters."

## Coming in the next issue of The Women's Studies Review:

- Josephine Donovan on Mary E. Wilkins Freeman
- Verta Taylor on female sexual slavery
- Susan Koppelman on women writers
- John Stewart on anthropologists' looking at "Wild Women"

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Manuscripts should be no more than 10 double-spaced, typewritten pages in length and should be sent to The Editor, The Women's Studies Review, the Center for Women's Studies, 207 Dulles Hall, 230 West 17th Avenue, Columbus, Ohio 43210.

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