Lesbianism
LESBIANS IN THE MAINSTREAM:
IMAGES OF LESBIANS IN RECENT COMMERCIAL
FICTION

In 1975 Lisa Alther's publishers chose her novel *Kinflicks* for the best seller list's commercial hype. Not particularly well-written or compelling, *Kinflicks* is a long, rambling narration of a young woman's adolescence and young adulthood. Sex, motorcycle gangs, and the standard inhibitions of growing up in the fifties and the heroine toward college and a lesbian affair. *Kinflicks*, perhaps because of the extensive hype that pushed it, seems to have proved to commercial publishers that there was a market for a growing population of lesbian characters. We have read sixteen commercial-press novels, all written by women (fifteen published since *Kinflicks* and one before) which have in common the inclusion of a lesbian character or a lesbian experience.¹ We have looked at these books with the deliberate purpose of attempting to establish what images of lesbianism the mainstream commercial presses are willing to publish and promote today.

Although we use specific examples from the literature we have read, we recognize that we are not able to discuss any one novel in its full exploration, but only in the context of our own inquiry. Our intent is not to attack individual women writers but to learn more about where we, as lesbians, stand in relationship to the patriarchally controlled marketplace for fiction. We would like to emphasize that while these books vary greatly in the seriousness with which they take the lesbian experience, as well as in many other respects, we are attempting to study the themes which emerge when they are considered collectively. We hope that other women will address the differences among the various authors' intent and degree of seriousness, as we feel this would be an important investigation. Further, we have not been impressed with any particularly important differences among these books which are attributable to the authors' sexual preferences; however, we feel this might also be an interesting subject for study.

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One assumption of our investigation has been that these novels—regardless of the seriousness of the authors’ literary intentions—were published by commercial presses for their appeal to a mainstream audience, not their appeal to a lesbian audience. This assumption about what constitutes the basis for commercial selection of art was confirmed most blatantly in a recent review of the film *Bilitis*. Film critic David Rosenbaum assures us that film director David Hamilton “is a whiz at evoking lesbian reveries without vulgarity,” and further, that “the first hour of *Bilitis* is the answer to every lecher’s prayer.” Unfortunately for the lecher, that “sustained eroticism” turns into a boring “gibble-gabble about life and love” between the two heroines. The result, concludes Rosenbaum, “is that *Bilitis* becomes a lesbian lullaby and even the most devoted lecher will find himself slipping off into slumberland way before *Bilitis* concludes with a sigh and a whimper.” This male critic obviously assumes that he is the audience for whom this film about lesbians was made—an assumption in which he is quite likely correct.

Like the film industry, the commercial press industry is a place where mainstream trends and reactions are recorded and played up, often for economic gain. When a publisher chooses a book as a potential commercial success, he advertises it as the latest trend and promotes the author as the authority on the subject. When the subject of the book—whether novel or non-fiction—is described as feminism, the author becomes a media feminist and is proclaimed a portrayer of or spokesperson for all things labelled “feminist.” The same process operates in the depiction of lesbians: a portrait that is “acceptable” to commercial publishers is advertised as the “authentic” portrait. By examining our own lives and experiences as lesbians in comparison with the current lesbian presence in fiction, we can better understand the impact such portraits have on us personally, culturally, and politically.

Several dominant themes recur in these books: the common factor is that all in some way disempower the lesbian. The lesbians who emerge in these novels lack erotic power; they are preoccupied with bisexuality and/or heterosexuality, or simply have no time for sex, or suffer from a mind/body split in which the flesh demands the relationship with a woman, but the mind rejects this option. Their politics are either too demanding or too naive for good use. They are primarily white middle-class or upwardly mobile working-class women obsessed with finding a place in an already established
order, searching for a mode of existence that will allow them to “fit in.” The exceptions are a few highly stylized lesbian characters who display the “glamour” of the lesbian lifestyle, but who still are largely concerned with how they are perceived by the world of heterosexuals. Few of these characters are granted an intelligent inner life. Most find some sort of punishment awaiting them. They share a general inability to glean from their lives any profound insights which might lead to a political or revolutionary understanding of their situation. The two books by Black women are exceptions to some of the above generalizations, but even in these works, lesbians are punished drastically by the time the books end.

The Punishment Theme... condemned to survival

On the thousands of copies of Kinflicks sold in paperback, reviewers’ comments leap out at the reader from the cover: “Wildly erotic, exuberantly funny masterpiece,” “ribaldly funny,” “an exuberant raunchy novel.” The New York Times found it “a talented comic novel” and The New Yorker announced that “Ginny’s sexual adventures and misadventures are among the funniest ever recorded.” Doris Lessing is quoted as saying that “Kinflicks had me laughing at four in the morning.” Kinflicks is a novel that will give lesbian readers nightmares.

We are asked to follow Ginny through her high school heterosexual explorations, her years at a women’s college, her intense intellectual admiration for her spinster teacher, and her later painful rejection of that woman as she finds her own life in a lesbian relationship. Whatever the tone of the novel—flippant, semi-grotesque, self-denigrating—these are scenes believable to a lesbian reader. But in the middle of the novel, after Ginny has spent several years with her female lover Eddie, the author creates an argument about a man—not a man in the novel, but man as an abstraction:

“You’re tired of me, Ginny. You want a man.
A cock,” she added with distaste.

“No! That’s not true!”

“I’ve been expecting it. You don’t need to deny it. It was bound to happen sooner or later. You’ve just been playing around with me. Basically, you’re as hetero as they come.” (291)

Alther never explores why “IT” was bound to happen. And Ginny,

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an apparently totally suggestable character, begins to be interested in a man. After several encounters, Ginny and Ira, the local insurance man, are maneuvered by the author into the bedroom to discuss a life insurance policy.

"Now I have a plan here that would give you the kind of coverage..." He whirled around to show me what he'd written. As he did so, he accidentally butted me with his shoulder. I lost my balance and fell backwards, landing on my back on Laverne's bed. As I fell, one of my legs became tangled behind one of his knees, causing it to collapse. He fell forward and landed on top of me. (343)

Hardly comic writing, these are tortured stage directions designed to manipulate the characters so that Ginny's lover can walk into the bedroom to catch Ginny and Ira lying on the bed. Eddie is furious, of course, and betrayed. She runs out the door, jumps on the insurance salesman's snowmobile, races down the hill, and is decapitated by a piece of fencing wire: "Just before Eddie reached the pond, Ira's Sno Cat appeared to hesitate slightly. The next instant, Eddie's head flew off her shoulders and bounced and spun across the ice like a crazed basketball" (344). Within a month Ginny has married Ira. In the more than one hundred fifty pages left of the novel, she never mourns or reflects on the years she spent with Eddie. But Ginny has been punished. The novel does not end with a happy-go-lucky Tom Jones character off to new adventures. Ginny is miserable. She has been prohibited by her husband from seeing her young daughter. She contemplates suicide but she doesn't need to end her life, for she has already achieved a successful self-lobotomization. "Like most of her undertakings, her proposed suicide had degenerated into burlesque. Apparently she was condemned to survival. At least for the time being... She left the cabin, to go where she had no idea" (518). Ginny is hardly the epitome of the ribald comic character.

Kinflakes did not establish, but rather continued, the time-honored tradition that lesbianism must be punished. From The Well of Loneliness through the pulp lesbian fiction of the fifties to the present, few lesbian characters escape either a dire fate or the conviction that they are wrong and deserving of a dire fate.14 In Loving Her, published the year before Kinflakes, Ann Shockley's Black character leaves a brutal husband, goes to a white woman lover, overcomes or manages to ignore some of the racism in the white gay community,
and begins to experience a momentary sense of peace and happiness with her lover. Then, in the book’s final pages, she is beaten by her husband and loses her daughter to a fatal auto accident when the husband takes the child for a ride. Though the two woman lovers reconcile on the final page, the reader is so stunned by the punishment that she can hardly believe that they can in fact go on from there. Though, of course, they must. They too are “condemned to survival.”

In the year following *Kinflicks* four novels by women were published that focus in some way on lesbianism, three of them with a violence as directed at that of *Kinflicks*.16 Lois Gould’s *A Sea Change* only comes close to using the word lesbian once, not when the women in the novel are making love to one another, and not as an expression of sexuality, but as its opposite. “‘Ice,’” Leo Bailey thought. ‘Dry ice. Maybe a lesbo’” (114). The women in *A Sea Change* hate their bodies; both are described as beautiful women, one a former model:

... At one point, without thinking, Kate asked if Jessie still hated her breasts. ... They had always talked about breasts in school—everyone they knew hated something about her own breasts: the size, or the shape, the heaviness or the proportion, the pointiness or lack of pointiness. Jessie’s breasts belonged on a Botticelli Venus, but Jessie hated them. Nothing about them, just the fact of having them at all. (56)

When the women make love, Jessie “would not touch Kate’s breasts, and she would not let Kate touch hers” (59). Sexuality is expressed not in touching or tenderness, but in dominance and submission. As the book opens, Jessie is being raped by a Black man who shoves a gun up her vagina. (The racist implication of Gould’s choice of a Black man to represent male power are appalling to us.) As it ends, she has turned into a man in order to rape (have sex with) her friend. This is the establishment of her power. To love a woman is to take power over her and shove a gun up her vagina. Kate responds erotically, as Jessie had before her, to the gunman’s demonstration of his “power.” “She has never been forced to confront her visceral response to that kind of power. He had come to make her do that; make her body admit what they both knew it felt. And he had succeeded” (136). This “abuse of feeling” is what Audre Lorde describes as pornography and obscenity.17 Their punishment is two-edged: the rape itself and each woman’s knowledge of her own (alleged) pleasure in this humiliation of her person.
Another form of rape surfaces in Susan Yankowitz’s *Silent Witness*. The protagonist is a deaf mute woman who is raped in prison by the other inmates: one woman holds her down, one squats on her face and uses Anna’s mouth, a third licks Anna’s cunt. Midway through this scene, Anna seems to become an active participant in the event. Her initial excitement is linked to the experience of being forced: “(She is not a rag doll, she is not a stone.) But how could she, can she? But she is excited. But actually she is being raped. But by women...” Ignoring the humiliation of this punishment, the loss of power experienced by the victim, the author informs us that it wasn’t like a real rape because the victim hadn’t been penetrated. The distinction is difficult to follow:

But this much is clear: this is the first sexual experience in which, ironically, she feels unthreatened. Finally there will be no penis to invade her: for always (she realizes it now) she has dreaded that moment of entry when, flesh like steel, it thrusts into her. (176-177)

Although Yankowitz tries to distinguish between the punishment of forceable rape and these events, we find this rape, nonetheless, a distressing punishment.

Rosa Guy’s novel *Ruby* begins as a story of a developing relationship between two young Black women. The writing in this novel is persuasive and the interactions between the two lovers are especially believable. One feels the anguish Ruby experiences when her father discovers their relationship and punishes her (both physically and emotionally) until she attempts suicide. Her lover, Daphne, contributes to Ruby’s punishment, when she tells her she is “going straight” in order to make it in the white “bougie” world of Brandeis College. As in *Silent Witness*, it would seem that the reader is not supposed to notice these punishments, since in the final scene of the novel Ruby’s father asks a teenage boy whom Ruby once admired to stop up and see her. Clearly, this scene is designed as a reward for heterosexuality. Instead of following her first instinct and telling him to go away, Ruby “put her hand up to touch her disheveled hair,” straightening herself for the man’s eye. The lesson of her punishment obviously learned, she tells her sister, “Tell him another time... Maybe tomorrow” (217). The mandate both to punish Ruby and to have her turn back to males in the end would seem to be especially strong in this novel because it was originally intended for “young adult” readers.¹⁸

Blanche Boyd in *Mourning the Death of Magic* investigates the
world of a suicidal lesbian. Seduced by a teacher who then deserts her, Galley lives with drugs and depression and nervous breakdowns. At its heart this novel develops the relationship of Galley and her sister, Mallory; it explores their reliance on one another and their perspectives of a shared past. We applaud the author for taking on this subject. However, the book ends abruptly just after we find out that Galley's last suicide attempt was related to her sexual feelings for Mallory, and that she and Mallory have become lovers. This maneuver apparently is intended to redeem Galley, but it is a precarious redemption, as indicated by another character's comments on Galley's suddenly hearty state: "Everyone was delighted, though of course no one expected it to last" (212). Galley has exhibited no self-love, no sense of direction; she is portrayed as so fragile that one is left envisioning a future in which disappointment in this incestuous relationship will almost surely lead to suicide.

_The Reckoning_ by May Sarton has only one openly lesbian character, a minor figure who is about to be punished for publishing a lesbian book. Her lover, who needs to stay in the closet, has threatened to leave her if she publishes the book. The love that the protagonist, Laura, has for Ella, a woman friend of many years, is the more significant thread of the novel. Laura is dying of cancer and wants to spend her final months acknowledging the "real connections," but will not let herself call or write Ella, the presence she longs for more and more as her life ebbs. Finally Ella does come and through re-establishing their connection, Laura feels some resolution in her relationship to her mother. The potential richness of women communing together is portrayed mainly in the abstract: its absence in Laura's living is the primary grievance of her dying. The punishment theme emerges as a deprivation in the woman who cannot credit her lesbian feelings until she is dying of cancer. This failure is deeply linked to Laura's sense of loss and profound powerlessness.

In Doris Grumbach's novel _Chamber Music_, two homosexual men die horrible, lingering deaths from syphilis. Much of the book is taken up with graphic, physical details of what this wasting disease does to the human body and mind. When Caroline, wife of one of these men, and Anna, his nurse, finally become lovers, their love is a joyful and celebratory experience. It is sexual and fulfilling: their lives together represent the best kind of sharing and growing for each woman. But after Anna dies in an influenza epidemic, Caroline lives the rest of her life, another fifty years, in solitude and inactivity. Literally "con-
demned to survival," her continuing life is the inevitable punishment for the few years of freedom and happiness she has experienced.

The fates of these protagonists might have been the same, in some instances, if they had loved men instead of women: Laura might still have died of cancer, Caroline might still have lived a meaningless and protracted later life. However, the collective experience of these books shows us a continuing thread in the history of punishment for the lesbian. While we do not mean to insist that lesbian stories must have happy endings, we feel that lesbians must recognize the frequency and magnitude of punishments meted out in these novels. Perhaps the presence of this theme is a measure of the depth of homophobia in our culture. Certainly lesbian writers must be free to explore the lesbian experience fully, and this includes our own homophobia, as well as our other problems and pains. But we must ask ourselves: what would a series of positive resolutions mean to us as we read the stories of our lives? What would be the effect of woman empowerment and why have not these stories also been published?

Erotic Power . . . or "disconcerting flesh."

Audre Lorde states in *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*:

In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.¹⁹

Lorde says that it is false to believe that we need suppress the erotic to be truly strong women. We think back to the impotence of our lives before we recognized ourselves as lesbians and contrast that impotence with the exhilaration of coming out as lesbians, with the flood of power we experienced in our bodies, our lives, our work, as we created relationships with women, allowed ourselves to be fully ourselves. "Of course, women so empowered are dangerous,"²⁰ Lorde reminds us. While we cannot prove by the absence of such empowering stories that the commercial presses have deliberately turned them down, we can say with conviction that the lack of erotic power available to lesbians in the novels they have chosen to publish is conspicuous.²¹

One account of women coming together and out of that experience becoming more connected to themselves, more powerful, occurs
in Silent Witness. Once Anna’s place within the community of women in prison has been established, she and Flora come together as lovers:

not the word (love) only but the expression of it in Flora’s eyes and in the caress of hands and in, most of all, kisses. It is the first time that Anna has kissed a woman full on the lips. A plush as goosedown mouth sinks into her mouth. A ditto body embraces her. It is not, as with a man, hard against soft, angle against curve, bone against flesh. Now there are breasts pillowing her breasts, a stomach rounding into hers, thighs trembling against her thighs; but whose breasts, stomach, thighs; whose mouth, whose buttocks, whose body is whose when they two are crushed into each other like this, so identically merged? . . . They do not fit one into the other, but fuse into a single body that sways and undulates. Is it instinct or experience that causes Flora to stroke so gently here, to press so amorously there? But for Anna it is renewed discovery of . . . her capacity to give and receive love generously, without fear of invasion or pain. Flora’s kisses arouse her to tenderness. Caresses catapult her into orgasm. One of them sobs; but which?

After Anna and Flora begin their relationship, and as Anna works out her relationship with other women in prison, they begin to form into a political force. They take action, confront prison authorities about their conditions, make some gains. The most important gains, one senses, are in themselves, in the respect they develop for themselves, for each other, for the power of their solidarity.

It is not possible, however, to report the impressive sensibility of these scenes without remembering the earlier scene: the juxtaposition of the lesbian rape with the later emergence of lesbian power expresses a deep ambivalence in the overall presentation of lesbianism, an ambivalence which no doubt made this novel more palatable to the commercial publishing world. Other novels also contain joyous and erotic moments (Ruby, Loving Her, Chamber Music), but the effect of these moments is erased by the characters’ final punishments.

In many of the novels erotic power is undermined by ludicrous descriptions of lesbian sexuality. Writers who are perfectly capable of depicting a vivid scene or image falter under the pressure of describing
what it is that we do. When in Class Notes Kate Stimpson creates lesbian sexual scenes she seems to clutch her pen and write stilted, unnatural prose which leaves us far from enchanted. In one scene, Sophia "stroked Harriet's throat as if the gesture ornamented memory" (123). At least one reader must still be hopelessly entangled in this abstraction. During another encounter, "She sloughed the sheet and the pajama top from Harriet's body. Harriet felt as if she were a tree and Marcia, intently, intelligently, were taking a branch there, a leaf here" (195). The language seems more reminiscent of mutilation than lovemaking. In the single lesbian sexual description in Marge Piercy's The High Cost of Living, the imagery descends into grotesquery: "breasts making love rubbing against breasts... a mound of living breasts nudging each other swift and squirming and hot and passionate as little piglets, little piglets at the tits. But the tits were hungry piglets themselves, both question and answer. Mouth on mouth. Eyes becoming one round huge eye staring into the other" (114).

In Erica Jong's How to Save Your Own Life, lesbian sexuality is not perceptibly different from heterosexuality. It is, rather, indicative of a kind of chic trendiness in the protagonist. "It was stylish," Jong tells us, "to have a lesbian affair that year," and, further, "I thought I might want to write about it" (149). She goes to bed with Rosanna, not out of lust but curiosity. After the first time their bedding was a matter of "obligation." Rosanna has given her an orgasm; she is now on the archetypal male quest to prove herself by giving Rosanna an orgasm, being a better fuck than the next fellow. She finds the experience of (so-called) lesbian sex exhilarating the first time because of breaking the taboo. Her response to this exhilaration is not the opening out of possibility that so many lesbians have expressed in their coming out stories,22 but... "How can I describe it? The word smug comes to mind... I felt so goddamned superior to all those people who wouldn't dare" (149). The lesbian affair has become a matter of one-up-manship. Clearly she has to feel this way since there are no rewards for her in the physical experience: "God help me, I am about to tell about my first impressions of cunt-eating and risk the wrath... of mine sisters: Gentle Reader, it did not taste good" (152). Under such circumstances, the only possible reward is the de rigeur orgasm, the orgasm that seems so elusive:

I was nibbling her clit as she had done for me... trying not to think of the smell... How long had it been?
An hour? Two? I began to understand what it meant
to be a man, fumbling around—is this the right place or is that? Help! I need some guidance. This is uncharted territory. (153)

Like the woman in Lois Gould's novel who must become a man to have sex with a woman, Erica Jong's heroine—ostensibly a woman—seems never to have noted her own sexual responses. Her ultimate solution to Rosanna's lack of orgasm is blatantly male-oriented. "I pounded away with dildo, Coke bottles, green plastic vibrators from Japan. A big one in the cunt and a little one in the ass. . . . I put cucumbers with ribbed condoms in her cunt and bananas covered with French ticklers" (155). She finally succeeds with an empty bottle of Dom Perignon champagne: "I had the pleasure of seeing Rosanna Howard reach tumultuous orgasm with the bulging green base of a Dom Perignon bottle protruding from her reluctant cunt. . . . Would she have come with Paul Masson or Taylor's New York State? I think the answer is clear" (156).

Penis, cucumber, coke bottle. These are not the instruments of lesbian sexuality, but rather the images of heterosexuality established earlier in the novel when the angry Isadora fucks her husband instead of leaving him.

She hates him, she despises him, but she wants his strange root-shaped [sic] cock inside her. . . . He lies motionless, silent, the man who died with an erection and then grew harder as rigor mortis set in. She climbs on his upraised penis. . . . using it as a dildo, coldly. (118-119)

When he comes, she wonders, "What kind of a man is it who makes no noise at all when he comes? A dead man? She feels tainted, ashamed, slightly necrophilic. She climbs off his dead penis and lies there at his side" (119). Necrophilia—the logical extension of objectified sexuality, a sexuality that exists without caring, without emotional commitment—has little to do with lesbian eroticism, with the lesbian existence we are trying to create within our community and culture.

Self-hatred, expressed as it is in the conversation about breasts in Lois Gould's A Sea Change, occurs frequently and is another element that distorts the potential of lesbian sexuality. After Jong's description of how terrible cunts smell and taste, she has her heroine suggest, "It almost seemed she should be brought a silver finger bowl (with rose petals floating in it) after touching my cunt" (152). At the end of Kate Stimpson's Class Notes the heroine knows she is a lesbian,
but wonders, “what was she to do now with her own flesh?” That flesh desires women and her first impulse towards it is destructive:

Harriet wanted to rip off her own skin; to jaw away at the flesh of her own thighs; to yank at the mat of her scalp; to reach through her heart to release blood sufficient to smear against the mirror, over the image of the unwanted, disconcerting flesh. (223-224)

She tries to reconcile her mind, her self, to the reality of living with her body. “Despite taboos, despite the pain the taboos nurtured, despite the bite of her mind against itself as it sought reunion with the body, she was happier with women than with men” (224). Wholeness, for this lesbian, never becomes an option. Self-hatred is inherent in the wrenching apart of what the mind wants from what the body wants, a separation of sexuality from intelligence and from caring commitment. Stimpson’s heroine reminds herself of “more pressing worries” (225), work, challenges to her mind. We are left to assume that she will do good works in the world in order to make up for the indulgence of her body. This is not an acceptance of self, an integration or wholeness out of which strength and power will or can emerge.

In Jane DeLynn’s Some Do we are given portraits of two apparently dissimilar lesbians. Bettina is described as having a debilitating handicap: “she wasn’t even normal, she was ugly” (5). She is also portrayed as so dumb her sexual urges are only expressed as vague animal longings; her self-hatred is an implicit part of her self-concept. As she walks toward her first meeting with Kirsh,

She had this strange desire to go down on her hands and legs and bark like a dog. She wanted to lick Kirsh’s feet. She wanted to roll on her back on the floor and have Kirsh’s feet tickle her tummy. She wanted to be flushed down the toilet and dissolve like a piece of toilet paper in the ocean. It was where she came from, it was where she belonged. (4)

She really comes from an Ohio suburb, and it is to that suburb she returns at the end of the book, to live with her husband and children.

Even her family jokingly came to refer to her time in California as a “vacation.” Columbus was clearly “real life.” In “real life” one did not sleep with members of
one's own sex, and Bettina didn't... that was part of the deal she had made with God, in return for Donald's taking her back. (That was how she thought of it, as Donald "taking her back.") She obeyed him and her parents as if she were a child waiting to grow up and be free. (345)

The other lesbian, Maria, is Black and says she is "proud to be a dyke." But she refers to her lovers as "new cunt" and justifies her use of denigrating self-hating terminology by insisting, "It's like niggers calling themselves niggers. I'm a nigger, but if you call me that, I'll punch you in the mouth" (150). The women she chooses as lovers are "skinny little white girls who looked like ex-addicts" (175). DeLynn's grammar deserts her when she tries to explain that "Maria used dildos: flesh-colored plastic objects to resemble penises" (175), never specifying what color is flesh color. Cass, a white member of Maria's c.r. group, "loved these tales of the little white girls Maria brought home and stuck her dildo into. Maria was a real original. Of course, it was vaguely disgusting. But that was what made it interesting" (174). And, of course, Maria's lovers adore this treatment. "She had no trouble getting lovers, and if she wanted them to, they always came back, each and every one of them, no matter what their politics" (175).

The racism and homophobia in this novel are blatant. That Maria is Black seems a fictional convenience. We never see Maria interact in the Black community. Two Black men appear briefly, one in a completely gratuitous and out-of-context account, in graphic detail, of a Black man falsely accused of rape, who is castrated and dies hemorrhaging while holding his penis in his hand. The other Black man—perpetuating the stereotype of how lesbians "get that way"—rapes Maria and turns her against men for life. Maria never has a Black lover or friend or support network within the Black community. Insisting that the intent of this characterization is to show that contradictions exist in our lives, the back cover blurb depicts Maria as "a black lesbian militant who, despite her rhetoric sleeps only with white women."22 But we are never shown the political side of Maria. We have no idea whether her "rhetoric" is directed toward left politics or Black nationalism or women's rights, or whether, indeed, she has any political commitment. The use of the sensationalized portrait, instead of actual character development, is another device by which lesbian women are divested of their potential for erotic power.
We find this phenomenon repeated in Rita Mae Brown’s *Six of One*, a novel in which aristocratic lesbians roll around in bed, “carrying on like trash” (66). But Brown never takes on an intimate description of a sexual encounter. She relates how Celeste “in her wildness, had torn off Ramelle’s blouse” (33) without ever portraying them in a tender, lovemaking context. In the novel’s most erotic scene, Celeste goes to her servant Cora for comfort on a lonely night. Cora takes her into her bed and gives her just that. Celeste is, of course, titillated by breaking the master/servant taboo. Brown seems regularly to create characters who might be considered professional taboo-breakers; unfortunately, they fill that role so frequently that their reactions are rote and unenlightening. Despite the fact that most of the primary characters in *Six of One* are lesbians, lesbianism is not an issue this novel explores.

Several other novels suggest that sexual preference is no more an issue than, say, hair color or body type. The lesbian who appears briefly at the end of Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room* is peripheral to the novel’s plot. Isa finds coming out an affirming experience; she flowers, becomes more beautiful. She has affairs with two married women after her first lover leaves her to marry a man. She does nothing political as a result of loving women. She bonds with no one, she is not powerful. She appears in the novel to demonstrate that the protagonist has encountered all of the options of life and deliberately chosen celibacy.

In Mary Gordon’s *Final Payments*, lesbianism is used to fill the space that should have been taken up by actual characterization. Having designated a minor character lesbian, Gordon feels under no obligation to develop her further. In fact, her three women characters, all friends, are in some ways bound, limited, by their sexuality. The protagonist is vigorously heterosexual, though she has had to repress these urges for years until her sick father dies. She looks for support to two friends: one is the lesbian, the other a celibate woman. This lesbian, like the one in Jong’s novel, chooses not to leave her husband to live with her lover. Her decision is not explored in depth and the reader is left with Gordon’s implication that the marriage perquisites are more than any lesbian would willingly give up: a rich, powerful politician husband, a country estate with horses, babysitters, etc.

Whether the experience of lesbians in these individual books is
neutral, explicitly negative, or ambivalent, the collective experience of lesbianism portrayed in them is depressingly uniform, and dissimilar to our own lives. In “Lesbian Existence and Compulsory Heterosexuality,” Adrienne Rich states,

The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain.34

While the reader of commercial press books may find accounts of guilt, self-betrayal, and pain documented in connection with the lesbian experience, she will find largely absent from the record joy, sensuality, courage, community—vital elements of our erotic and creative power. While the trend to publish lesbian scenes is clearly existent, the house prescription is one which predictably distorts the realities of lesbian existence while pretending to give us records of our lives.

Lesbians in the Mainstream... “wigging upward”

Identifying ourselves as lesbian means, for most of us, an enormous alteration of life expectations from those defined by the heterosexist culture. Some of us have had to deal with the realization that we will never marry and have children in the conventional way that would win us the approval of relatives, friends, and colleagues. Some of us have had to face losing the children that were part of a heterosexual union. Most of us have to deal with obtaining and maintaining economic resources through dependence on patriarchal institutions. Often this requires us to hide our lesbianism. Whatever our circumstances, a lesbian identification almost inevitably means not being a “good girl” in the way the straight world has defined it; we are trying not to get into the mainstream but rather to understand what it means to stand apart from it. Almost nowhere in this literature do we find such an essential theme discussed or developed.

Instead, the protagonists in Marge Piercy’s The High Cost of Living and in Alix Shulman’s Burning Questions focus most of their energies on finding approval. Leslie, the heroine of The High Cost of Living, is a lesbian of working-class origins. She sees herself as trying to work her way out of the “narrowness” of that world and into the mainstream world of the bourgeoisie. “Miss Greening has saved her
from her class fate by involving her in school” (143). Honor, the young woman whom Leslie chooses to pursue, appeals to her by being "eccentric" for a working-class woman. "The girl was affected, but placed in the house she became more interesting, like an orchid growing out of a crack in the sidewalk" (20). Honor complains that the people in her real life such as her Mama are invading it, and in response Leslie gives her lessons in upward mobility: "You'll leave home soon and things will start to happen. Then books won't be more interesting than the people you meet, people you have something in common with" (23). If Leslie feels that they, as the tokens of their class, have anything in common with their families, she never reveals it. Bernie, a gay man with whom she later has an affair, is another of these tokens.

"Besides we won't be poor. We're both wiggling upward, Bernie, we've shed our class. We've flayed ourselves bare and plastered over our bleeding flesh with accents and books and classes and everything we weren't and wanted to be." (135)

When Bernie asks, "Do you like yourself?" she responds, "I guess not. Not yet. I'm an unfinished project and I show too many signs of haste and wretched planning" (135). While Peric portrays some of the alienation fostered by a class system which encourages upward mobility with few backward glances, she fails to bring her characters to a class consciousness in which they demonstrate an understanding of the forces which operate against them, and she likewise fails to show the pain such alienation produces. Instead, they shun their families and seem to believe that self-love will grow with refinement and further distance from their origins. Certainly all of us of working-class origins remember this indoctrination, as we remember the pain of the occasions when we strove for refinement and sophistication, and ended up feeling like imposters who had plastered on a very thin veneer. While we encourage exploration and understanding of the phenomenon of upward mobility and do not mean to advocate downward mobility, we wish that Peric had gone further in breaking through the mesh of complexity of the class issue. Because her characters do not vigorously examine the system in which they are "wiggling upward," they seem, finally, to internalize the alienation which needs to be directed outward. They appear to have accepted the invitation to assimilate.29

Leslie assumes that obtaining her Ph.D. will be a broadening experience, both intellectually and financially, but this assumption is never examined by the author in what purports to be a political novel.
Leslie's work, as such, is ephemeral, and difficult to assess. A paper on railroads occupies her for most of the novel; we never learn what she is doing with railroads or how the study will expand her life. She finds exciting the mysterious archival materials to which she is supposed to have access, but does not protest when at the end of the book her dissertation director pulls her off work with those papers and changes her topic without notice. Piercy tells us several times that Leslie's work is important to her, but we never follow her into that place and see why. For any woman with a feminist consciousness graduate school can be an excruciating experience. Leslie's education is filled with contradictions and competitions which she accepts unquestioningly. Perhaps most distorted is the assumption that her Ph.D. will guarantee her high-paying employment. As a woman, as an open lesbian in an all-male field, there is a better than average chance that she will spend much of her professional life unemployed, at best underemployed—a problem which is never discussed.

Piercy's portrait of life in the lesbian community seems as stifling as her portrait of life in the working-class community. At one point Leslie muses, "If she were living here alone, having lost her lover, they would be wary of her... The narrowness of the world they created here grated upon her..." (119). She is lonely in her new city but never becomes part of the community of feminists there; they are "too demanding" and make her feel guilty for not giving them enough of her time and energy. Leslie rejects this lesbian feminist community along with her working-class origins for the "larger" world. Although Piercy shows us at the end of the novel that the Ph.D. director is a morally and intellectually bankrupt man, Leslie nonetheless gets on her motor bike and rides back to work further with him. Her anger at him is violent, but repressed. She knows "some reckoning was coming due. She had to face what she had not been facing" (266). In spite of the title of the book, however, the reckoning of the cost to Leslie does not take place within its pages.

The protagonist of Shulman's Burning Questions, Zane, is a middle-class woman with revolutionary yearnings. Like Piercy's character, she would like to reject her origins as "too narrow," and move into the large exciting world of "beat" Greenwich Village. We follow her from that world to marriage and finally to feminism and lesbianism. Zane clearly admires those lesbians in the women's movement whose attraction to women comes through their political involvement:
A new breed of lesbian began to come out. Self-styled ‘political lesbians’ who, often as not, had yet to make love to their first woman but who, nevertheless, hungering for some self-respecting life which would enable them to repudiate men without repudiating love, proclaimed themselves gay. (279)

Shulman seems blind to the anguish of a woman who, in seeking a “self-respecting” life as a lesbian, has to encounter herself in the context of a society in which every message is that to be lesbian is not to be self-respecting. Integrating one’s politics and one’s sexuality is to be applauded, surely, but this seems an enormous oversimplification of that process to those of us who have endured much pain and difficulty in our long comings to lesbianism.

Zane implies that she does not, herself, have an erotic attraction to women, but thinks those who do must find it fulfilling; the implication somehow is that those who come to sleeping with women through their politics are less queer than those who don’t, or, perhaps, are less threatening to men. She does notice some differences in sleeping with women; she feels freed from roles and is relieved to have a lover who doesn’t mind if she thinks, and with whom she feels equal. Passion is mentioned once, but in a passionless manner, that is, the passion is the same as it has been with men. Zane concludes that she has been duped by men into giving herself to them and she says that the truth is “that we prefer women to them” (283).

If these insights seem as if they had been dropped by a disappearing ghost, it is because Shulman drops Faith, Zane’s lover, just after she has begun to form as a character, and drops Zane’s relationship to her, explaining only much later in the novel that their relationship foundered on the one “unsuspected difference,” time. “We might have gone on loving if we’d had the time, but the parameters of our lives had been hopelessly incongruous” (321). Zane lived by “clocks and compromises.” Faith followed impulses. Since we never see these women interact as primary sources for each other, our conclusion must be that they did not give each other enough to be worth making time for. If either of them suffers loss, it is not mentioned.

Even Zane’s most positive statements about loving women suffer from her sense of male evaluation: “My god, Faith... You’re so lovely. Now I see what men love so much in women. You’re so soft, so delicate” (283). Not only does this observation deny the existence
of misogyny, but one must wonder why Zane does not observe, "Now I see what women love so much in women."

In the last section of the book when Zane seems unsure of whether the feminist revolution is over or not, we are told: "For some sisters men had been eliminated from their lives altogether, while for others they've gradually been resuming their place as the main attraction" (303). It would be one thing for a woman like Zane to say that she thinks she wants to sleep with men after all, or that she has commenced a search for a man who is willing to deal with his sexism. But to place them as the "main attraction," to use the word "resume," conveys the deep ambivalence running throughout this novel, the conviction that women are not really good enough to ally with. Clearly Zane never really did "prefer women." She knows that she must prefer the patriarch, as he is her source of approval and of token power. After she rises to some fame and fortune in the women's movement and participates in a feminist collective where the women all seem to admire and respect her, Zane is invited back to her home town to give a commencement address. With her parents seated in the front row, she delivers a speech which, one assumes, undermines their values. When her father criticizes her, she cries, "Still Daddy? Isn't there anything I can do to please you? Isn't anything enough?" (298). She has not yet learned the lesson most basic to political survival and growth—that she cannot expect the approval of those she is attacking. The last chapter of *Burning Questions*, entitled "Winner's Luck," implies that only a few can be winners and that Zane will be among them. Such a description is hardly an accurate portrayal of our lives; it is rather a betrayal, a false portrait that misrepresents and trivializes the struggle, pain, and joy of lesbian-feminist existence.26

Despite the fact that most lesbian women spend a great deal of time and energy on attaining some economic security or at least assuring material survival, very few characters in these novels show more than blithe concern for the economics of their lives. Shulman throws in the off-hand comment, "When Ricky left us we had to move to humbler quarters" (300). Later Zane says, "My New School classes hardly brought me real power. They barely paid enough to keep me and could be dropped without notice" (305). While this statement would seem to indicate a firm understanding of Zane's predicament, Shulman never pursues this further and one is left feeling that precarious economics are never of central concern.
In contrast to the books written by white women, we found that *Loving Her* and *Ruby* were grounded much more solidly in a sense of concern for material survival. "The bills were mounting and Jerome Lee had been away for a month without a word" (19). The tension over economics is woven in with the other tensions of Renay's relationship to Jerome in *Loving Her*. After she leaves him, she lives with a wealthy white woman lover, Terry, who serves as an economic resource as well as an emotional support. The mother of a young daughter, Renay has an unsteady economic base. Terry grossly exploits her economic power, that is, she puts Renay to work as her cook, grocery shopper, etc., while trivializing Renay's need to work as a nightclub pianist.

"You really don't have to work, you know."
Work? Yes she *did* have to work. To let Denise know she was contributing to their keep, and to preserve her independence, but above all, to keep alive and active that integral part of her—her music.

(48)

Terry seems thick with an unconscious racism which often comes out in the spending of her money. "Terry could be so damn naive" (62), the narrator tells us. Incidents in which Terry's monetary offers are juxtaposed with her requests for food service are numerous and in-crminating. When Terry comes home with a college catalog and suggests Renay should resume her schooling, Renay doesn't even have a chance to open the catalog before Terry says, "Darling—feed me: I'm hungry. What's for lunch?" (63). We wish the author had taken a narrative stance more critical of the racism here. We do appreciate, however, the attention given to the economics of the relationship between Renay and Terry, and the implicit acknowledgement of the influence of material survival needs in a woman's life.

In *Ruby* we are again given some understanding of how the women's lives are affected by the flow of material resources. We are given an inside view of two families and a sense of the demands for and conflicts inherent in upward mobility for each. Ruby's father is a hard-working immigrant restaurant owner who has ambitions for Ruby to excel in school and move into educated circles. "You ain't come all the way to this country to end up no washerwoman nor clerk in a stinking office?" (40). Daphne's mother plays numbers and frequently expresses disdain for her daughter's arrogance: "It's about time she got used to the idea that dirty money pays for her expensive
tastes’. . . ‘There’s only room for one lady in this family’” (73), she says to let Daphne know that her education is possible because her mother is taking care of the business of survival. The upwardly mobile ambitions of both Daphne and Ruby are presented in the context of the possible conflict with their revolutionary potential. Ruby’s sister tells Daphne:

“You set yourself above the people.”
“Pray tell, how did you reach that conclusion?”
“Just look at the college you chose.” (137)

And later Ruby argues, “‘By the time you have finished, you will be one of them’” (162). In the end Daphne goes to Brandeis, her education supported, at least in part, by her mother’s sweepstakes winnings.

When the lesbian relationship between Daphne and Ruby is threatened by parental authority, they briefly consider moving away from their families, and rapidly become cognizant of the limitations of their own financial resources, which are essentially non-existent.

The recognition of economic reality in these two novels by Black women is instructive about class divisions among lesbians. Shockley and Guy recognize that the invitation to assimilate is a constant tactic of those in positions of power. We cannot afford to accept it. Nor can we condone authors who portray us as unknowing tokens.

“What has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community . . . .” Strength is rarely found in community in these contemporary novels. The exceptions are a community of women in prison (Silent Witness) and Ruby and Daphne’s connections to their Black community. In the white world women seem confused about community—which one they came from, which one they can buy into next, which one gives them approval.

These novels taken as a whole fragment, distort, trivialize, and betray lesbian experience. Cynthia Gair of Women in Distribution, until recently the foremost distributor of feminist press books, pointed out in an analysis of the reasons for WIND’s folding, “Feminist bookstore sales are off because the New York commercial houses are publishing so many women’s books today that they are readily available in regular stores. Book buyers don’t have to go to a feminist store in order to get women’s books.” Feminists need constantly to examine the assumption that the women’s books published by the commercial
presses portray what we recognize as women's lives. We need to know what the commercial presses will and have accepted for publication at any given time, why some books are acceptable and others not. We need to know if there is a particular image of the "lesbian" that the commercial presses have an investment in portraying, and we need to understand her relationship to us. We cannot possibly understand her if we fail to examine her in depth. We must also assure the continued development of our independent voices through our support of lesbian and feminist presses, periodicals, and bookstores.

Our lives are fragile; we can count on little as a matter of course. We manage to put these lives together in bits and pieces—ourselves, ourselves with one another. We piece our lives in spite of the mainstream culture that tries to define us, silence us, redirect us and our energies. In these novels we do not read about what we have found in our lesbian relationships—the intimacy, the support for our being and our working and our loving, the conflicts and political curiosity and exploration and tension of a vital, growing community.

NOTES

1975  Lisa Alther, Kinflicks, Alfred A. Knopf.
      Susan Yankowitz, Silent Witness, Alfred A. Knopf.
      Lois Gould, A Sea Change, Simon and Schuster.
      Rosa Guy, Ruby, Viking Press.
      Erica Jong, How to Save Your Own Life, Holt, Rhinehart and Winston.
      Alix Kates Shulman, Burning Questions, Alfred A. Knopf.
      Jane DeLynn, Some Do, MacMillan and Company.
      Rita Mae Brown, Six of One, Harper and Row.
      May Sarton, A Reckoning, Norton.
      Marge Piercy, The High Cost of Living, Harper and Row.
1979  Kate Stimpson, Class Notes, NY Times Books.
      Doris Grumbach, Chamber Music, E.P. Dutton.

3 High Cost of Living.
4 How to Save Your Own Life and Burning Questions.
5 The High Cost of Living.
6 Class Notes and A Reckoning.
7 The High Cost of Living.
8 Some Do and Six of One.
9 Class Notes and Burning Questions.
10 The High Cost of Living, Six of One, and Ruby.
11 How to Save Your Own Life, Six of One, Zoe’s Book.
12 Loving Her, Kinflicks, A Sea Change, Ruby, Mourning the Death of Magic, Some Do, A Reckoning, Class Notes, Chamber Music and The High Cost of Living.
13 All of the above.
14 Ruby and Loving Her.
15 See Blanche Wiesen Cook’s fine summary of the punishment theme in lesbian fiction during this period in “‘Women Alone Stir My Imagination’ Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition,” Signs, IV, 4, Summer 1979, pp. 718-739.
16 Gould, Yankowitz, Guy.
18 Frances Hanckel and John Cunningham ask “Can Young Gays Find Happiness in YA Books” in their article published in the Wilson Library Bulletin (March 1976, Vol. 50, No. 7) and conclude, “One wonders, however, whether any random selection of four YA novels could produce eight central characters with five sets of divorced parents (two of whom are alcoholic) and have plots with three natural deaths and one by violence—plus four car crashes resulting in one mutilation, one head injury, and five fatalities!”
19 Lorde, p. 1.
20 Lorde, p. 3.
22 Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe have edited an anthology of some of these stories. See The Coming Out Stories, Persephone Press, 1980. $6.95. Write: Persephone Press, P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, Mass. 02172.
23 The cover copy cited is from the trade paperback edition; the book was sufficiently successful to warrant a mass market edition (put out by Pocket Books, a Simon & Schuster Division of Gulf and Western Corporation) with more garish and provocative cover design and copy.


25 A phrase described by Mary Daly in Gyn/Ecology (Boston: Beacon, 1978). Daly says, "The assimilation of Amazons as Athenas into the Army is an essential aim of androcracy," its form: tokenism.

26 Beverly Tanenhaus explores these and similar issues in her excellent review of Burning Questions in Chrysalis, No. 7, 1979.

27 Kirsten Grimstad, "Introduction to the Feminist Publishing Catalog" in Chrysalis, No. 8, p. 106.