

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

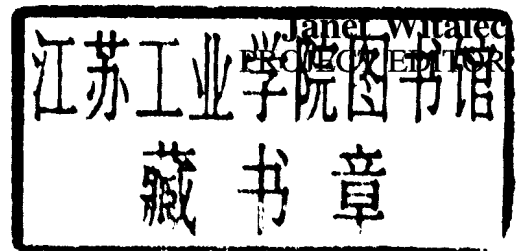
CLC

171

Volume 171

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 171

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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." In *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, edited by Charles Bernstein, 73-82. New York: Roof Books, 1990. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 169, edited by Janet Witalec, 3-8. Detroit: Gale, 2003.

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Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof Books, 1990. 73-82. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 169. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 3-8.

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Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Literature

For further information on Gay and Lesbian Literature, see *CLC*, Volume 76.

INTRODUCTION

Literature written by and about gays and lesbians has been highly visible and has attracted considerable critical attention since the 1960s in the United States. Whether through fiction, drama, poetry, or autobiography, homosexual literature typically explores issues of gender and identity, as well as the influences of ethnicity and social class on the individual. Since the act of openly declaring oneself gay or lesbian can sometimes inspire personal, economic, and social prejudices, many homosexual writers have heavily utilized metaphors and allegories in their works rather than address overt themes of gender identity or sexual preference. One of the most prevalent trends in homosexual literature has been an examination of issues surrounding the AIDS virus which has exerted a powerful impact on many gay communities since the 1970s.

The literary and the personal are often intertwined in discussions of gay literature. For example, autobiographical and fictional works such as *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982) by Richard Rodriguez and *How Town* (1990) by Michael Nava have been noted for their authors' intimate depictions of individuals who are doubly marginalized by being both gay and a member of an ethnic minority. Critics have also discussed the importance of style in homosexual literature, arguing that word choice and narrative structure can frequently reflect the sentiments of the author or characters. John Vincent has asserted that poet John Ashbery uses his own personal blend of "peculiar poetics" to depict his feelings about the "peculiar" experience of being gay. Mark Lilly has traced the expressive sense of weariness in the prose of Andrew Holleran—particularly in *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) and *Nights in Aruba* (1983)—commenting that the weariness reflects the frustrations of Holleran's gay characters as they struggle to find love and acceptance. Severo Sarduy's works are filled with images of imminent danger, mirroring the sometimes hurtful and even violent experience of being gay in the modern world. Homosexual writers regularly address issues of secrecy and shame, and the coming-out novel has remained a popular and enduring subgenre in gay literature. David Leavitt's *The Lost Language of Cranes*

(1986) is widely considered to be a prime example of a forceful and discerning coming-out narrative. John J. Clum has argued that, in the late twentieth century, significant strides have been made towards addressing homosexual themes and concerns in the genre of drama. Productions such as Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991), Terence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994), and Naomi Wallace's *In the Heart of America* (1994) have helped broaden the scope of contemporary theatre, bringing a new emphasis on gender roles and sexual politics to the stage.

Lesbian literature confronts many of the same issues as literature written by gay men, but it also addresses several singular themes that are unique to same-sex relationships between women. Many scholars have discussed the treatment of lesbians and lesbian relationships in works by Sara Maitland, Brigid Brophy, Jeanette Winterson, and Emma Donoghue, among others, tracing the progression from oblique references in early works to frank treatments in contemporary lesbian literature. Lynne Harne and Tara Price-Hughes have explored the variety of roles available to women in lesbian literature and have additionally compared how women and lesbians are viewed in world cultures—suggesting that women in these settings are offered a wider spectrum of roles than in Western culture. In such discussions, Harne and Price-Hughes have focused on texts including Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen* (1986), and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) to explore the roles available to lesbians and women in societies that differ from a traditional patriarchal order. Scholars and critics have emphasized that lesbian relationships need to be viewed as separate and distinct from either heterosexual or gay relationships, due to the additional pressures on women living in a male-dominated world. Overall, there is a strong political component within both gay and lesbian literature, as the worlds these literatures depict are routinely filled with characters who suffer from violence, discrimination, marginalization, and ridicule.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Samuel Adamson
Clocks and Whistles (play) 1996

June Arnold
Sister Gin (novel) 1975

John Ashbery

As We Know (poetry) 1979

A Wave (poetry) 1984

Neal Bell

Somewhere in the Pacific (play) 1989

Brigid Brophy

The King of a Rainy Country (novel) 1956

Barbara Burford

The Threshing Floor (novel) 1986

Joe Calarco

Shakespeare's R & J (play) 1997

Emma Donoghue

Stir Fry (novel) 1994

Hood (novel) 1995

Louise Erdrich

The Beet Queen (novel) 1986

Ellen Galford

The Fires of Bride (novel) 1986

Patricia Highsmith

The Price of Salt (novel) 1952

Andrew Holleran

Dancer from the Dance (novel) 1978

Nights in Aruba (novel) 1983

Arturo Islas

The Rain God (novel) 1984

Migrant Souls (novel) 1990

Tony Kushner

Angels in America (play) 1991

David Leavitt

The Lost Language of Cranes (novel) 1986

Sara Maitland

Virgin Territory (novel) 1984

Terence McNally

Love! Valour! Compassion! (play) 1994

Michael Nava

How Town (novel) 1990

John Rechy

City of Night (novel) 1964

Numbers (novel) 1967

Richard Rodriguez

Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez (autobiography) 1982

Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father (autobiography) 1992

Severo Sarduy

Cobra (novel) 1973

Maitreya (novel) 1978

Leslie Marmon Silko

Almanac of the Dead (novel) 1991

Alice Walker

The Color Purple (novel) 1982

Naomi Wallace

In the Heart of America (play) 1994

Jeanette Winterson

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (novel) 1985

OVERVIEWS AND GENERAL STUDIES

Lynne Harne (essay date 1998)

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[In the following essay, Harne is critical of early lesbian fiction which tended to portray lesbian relationships as similar to gay or heterosexual ones, and discusses contemporary lesbian fiction that depicts lesbians in a more complex and realistic manner.]

I have been reading lesbian feminist contemporary fiction on and off since the early days of the women's movement in the 1970s. For me as for many other lesbian feminists, such fiction provides not only enjoyment but also at times affirmation of lesbian feminist identity, and on occasion it has reflected and contributed to debates about lesbian feminist politics. With some notable exceptions, however, I have found representations of lesbian feminist personal relationships in such fiction problematic. They are often imitative of heterosexual literature and present images of lesbian intimate relationships that are either highly romanticised or from the libertarian end of the spectrum, pornographic and objectifying of women, with some novels utilising both

types of representation. Moreover, representations of friendship between lesbians which are not sexual and other types of important relationships that lesbians may have, such as political and work relationships, are infrequently foregrounded as the subject matter of lesbian novels.

As such we are left with ideological messages about lesbian identity and politics which can be profoundly reactionary. Such messages convey the impression that in order to be a lesbian you have to be in a romantic and sexual relationship and that the fundamental goal of all lesbians is long-term domestic coupledom. Lesbians who are not in such relationships are viewed as 'sad and lonely' or sexually and emotionally 'unfulfilled'. Long-term coupledom is also seen as the only means of providing real security and safety for lesbians. The ideologies of 'falling in love' and/or sexual desire and attraction are viewed as unquestionable and unchallengeable emotions. These may be presented from an essentialist perspective as 'natural' feelings or from post-structuralist and psychoanalytic perspectives as being so deeply embedded within our psyches that they are out of our control.¹ Lesbians who are not in a sexual and emotional relationship are regarded as constantly being on the look-out for such a relationship or recovering from the last one. Perhaps such representations in what purports to be lesbian feminist fiction are not surprising, given the current paucity of political debate and discussion around lesbian personal relationships.

While lesbian feminists have highlighted the institution of heterosexuality as one of the cornerstones of patriarchal control of women, the ideologies of romantic love and of long-term 'monogamy' have been only spasmodically challenged and although issues such as autonomy and inequality have been addressed *within* lover relationships, the powerful discourse of coupledom, and a recognition that this can work against women's autonomy and the sustaining of feminist movements, has not been seriously critiqued in recent years. Julie Bindel and Joan Scanlon (1996) suggest that there has been a retreat into unquestioning coupledom by lesbian feminists as a response to the sexual exploitation and objectification of women represented in the sexual libertarian and S & M debates of the 1980s, and that there is an assumption that 'couple-structured relationships' are the only (moral) alternative to 'SM culture'. This retreat has been increased by material considerations such as fears of economic insecurity as the welfare state has diminished and by the professionalisation of feminist politics whereby the public and private worlds have once again become politically separated. This gap between the public and private has to a large extent been filled by therapy, which has not only depoliticised lesbian personal relationships to such a degree that it is almost impossible not to talk about them in psychological terms² but

has also had a profoundly negative effect on questioning the benefits of the couple relationship.

Much therapy for lesbians appears to be oriented towards reinforcing couple relationships: examples include couple counselling for relationships that are on the rocks; therapy to spice up your sex life when so called 'lesbian bed death' occurs (perhaps they just found something better to do); therapy for lesbians who love too much (what about the ideology of romance here); and therapy to 'recover' so that you can move on to the next relationship. Perhaps most insidiously the therapist becomes a synthetic substitute friend, a friend who will provide a sympathetic listening ear but who won't challenge you politically about your life.

The assimilationist politics of the lesgay movement, which has dispensed with feminist analysis, has also had an impact. This movement is campaigning for the legal recognition of lesbian and gay marriages and for lesbian and gay couples to have the same social rights as heterosexual couples, rather than challenging the assumptions of dependency involved in such policies and the ideology that it is desirable that everyone should live in couple relationships. The widespread adoption of the term 'partner', which tends to sound like a business arrangement, is an outcome of this type of politics.

On a more positive note, there do appear to be the beginnings of renewed theoretical debate on the politics of lesbians' personal relationships among lesbian feminists, including questioning the practice of prioritising and valuing the sexual couple relationship over and above other kinds of relationships, such as close friendships between women. Janice Raymond's groundbreaking book *A Passion for Friends* (1986) was one of the first to theorise the importance of *discerning* friendship in sustaining and building feminist movement, arguing that it is as much *hetero-relations* as *hetero-sexuality* that sustains hetero-patriarchy.

Going beyond the debates on 'non-monogamy' in the 1970s and early 1980s among lesbian feminists, where the issue was seen mainly in sexual terms, Becky Rosa (1994, pp. 107-8) defines monogamy as 'the ideology that as adults we should primarily bond with one person, meeting most of our [socially constructed] needs from them (sexual, emotional, physical etc.)'. We might also add to this list political, social and intellectual needs. Bindel and Scanlon stress that the concept of monogamy was developed by men to prescribe sexual fidelity for women, and was not ever meant to apply to men. They argue that it is the enforcing of 'emotional monogamy' through the practice of couplism that is damaging to the development of intimate friendships and to sustaining lesbian feminist political networks.

Rosa also questions whether the very real feelings of insecurity that lesbians experience actually diminish in exclusive couple relationships. While such relationships

may for a time provide a sense of safety from a patriarchal heterosexual world, the impossible demands often put on such relationships to make up for all kinds of insecurities invariably fail and result in relationship break-up. Friends are then turned to for emotional and social support, until a new relationship starts and the friend(s) may once again become less important than the new lover. She argues that so much time may be taken up in developing and sustaining a couple relationship that this allows little time for building feminist community and political activism.

Some lesbian feminists do attempt to practise their personal relationships in a different way, but, as Bindel and Scanlon emphasise, this is difficult to do in the current political and cultural vacuum where any questioning of romance and coupledness can appear 'unreasonable or judgemental'. In the early days of second-wave feminism, the ideology of romance was challenged far more than it is today, when any sexual relationship between lesbians is often now referred to uncritically as a 'romantic relationship', to distinguish it from and give it more value than (non-sexual) friendships.

Lesbian feminists have also problematised the male-defined concepts and language of personal relationships as applied to women, arguing that in the twentieth century a false dichotomy between sexual intimacy and friendship has been created, where only the former is supposed to carry with it close feelings of intimacy (Rosa, 1994). But there is also a danger in attempting to turn the clock back and romanticising friendships. Raymond warned against sentimentalising or assuming any natural capacity for women to be friends with each other, as happened in the early days of the movement. It cannot be assumed that we can be friends with all women, or that 'politics and friendship' always go together. Friendship can operate in many different ways and on different levels; nevertheless, many women experience friendships which are important in organising for political change and/or have considerable impact on their lives.

The confines of male-defined language remain. While lesbian feminists have attempted to replace the romantic connotations of the word *love* with others to describe all different kinds of close relationships and friendships between women, such attempts have so far been unsuccessful. Words such as affection³ seem hopelessly sentimental for the beginning of the twenty-first century, and we are left with inadequate terms to describe the different kinds of personal relationships that lesbian feminists may have with each other but that do not fit into the prescribed categories discussed above.

In looking at the representation of lesbian relationships in contemporary lesbian fiction I have not attempted a comprehensive review. I have revisited a few 'classic'

novels which seem to me to go beyond and challenge male-defined ideas of what lesbian relationships should be. Given what I have said above, it will be obvious that I have not looked at the specific genre of lesbian romance fiction! I also look at the representations of lesbian relationships in some recent lesbian fiction within one of the most popular current genres, the lesbian crime thriller.

Before starting, I do have to mention one novel which I have often heard referred to as the ideal model of what a lesbian lover relationship should be: *Patience and Sarah*. This book, purportedly written as a historical novel about a relationship between two women in the early nineteenth century, was first published in the United States in 1969 and in Britain in 1978. As Bonnie Zimmerman (1992) has pointed out, it encompasses most of the elements of the western heterosexual literary traditions of love and marriage: 'the transcendent mystical and even religious' connotations of true love, where the lovers are isolated from the (real) world and escape into a 'world of their own making' and 'the domestic comedy of marriage' which serves as a 'symbol of harmony, balance and unification' (p. 78).

In *Patience and Sarah* the two women find a sense of 'coming home' in their relationship when they escape to the 'Greene County' and build their own home and bed, which also symbolically serve to represent a safe haven from a hostile world and a sign of domestic bliss. It is this lethal combination of romantic love and domestic harmony to which some lesbian feminists still seem to aspire, and which continues to be reproduced in a number of subsequent cultural representations.

AMBIGUOUS ROMANCE AND FRIENDSHIP IN *THE PRICE OF SALT*

It has of course been argued that historically there was a need to produce novels that represented lesbian sexual relationships as being happy and positive as opposed to many of the sad, bad representations of pre-second-wave lesbian literature (Zimmerman, 1992). But by the 1950s there were a few lesbian novels which stood out as questioning the ideal of romantic love and which foregrounded the importance of lesbian friendship. One such novel is *The Price of Salt*.

The Price of Salt was written by Patricia Highsmith using the pseudonym Claire Morgan and was first published in 1952. It was republished by Naiad in 1984 still under the pseudonym of Claire Morgan. In the 1990s Highsmith finally declared herself as the author and it was republished in Britain by the Bloomsbury Press and Penguin under the less political title of *Carol*. I first read the book in 1984 when it was republished and it had particular resonance for me and other lesbian feminists and lesbian mothers at the time, because one

of the major themes of the book deals with a lesbian mother losing custody of her daughter. It is this 'price' of being a lesbian that the original title no doubt refers to.

The book has frequently been mentioned in historical and critical accounts of twentieth-century lesbian literature and has been represented as a novel of romantic love—one of the first to be written where there was a 'happy ending'. But this description does not do justice to the way the novel deals with such themes as the complex tensions between best friends and lovers and the importance of women's friendships. Further, as the novel develops Highsmith shows through her two main characters that she is both ambiguous and sometimes very critical of the ideal of romantic love. Through the plot the naïve and anxious young hero of the story, Therese, is cured of some of her romantic notions and is educated into the 'real facts of life', largely by Carol, the older woman with whom she develops a relationship. Towards the end of the novel Therese discovers what it means to live as a lesbian in a hostile patriarchal world. But there are also some positive possibilities, as she manages to achieve her ambition to be a stage designer and she discovers that there are other lesbians in the New York artistic world in which she moves.

At the beginning of the novel Therese meets Carol when she is working temporarily as a sales assistant in the toy department of a large store. Carol is a rich customer buying a Christmas present for her eight-year-old daughter. Highsmith presents this meeting as a classic instance of 'love at first sight'.

Their eyes met at the same instant, Therese glancing up from a box she was opening, and the woman just turning her head so she looked directly at Therese . . . Therese felt sure the woman would come to her. Then Therese saw her walk slowly towards the counter, heard her heart stumble to catch up with the moment it had let pass, and felt her face grow hot as the woman came nearer and nearer.

(p. 31)

The irony of this passage is underlined by a crucial incident at the end of the novel. Therese asks Carol why she came over to her in the store. She replies, 'For such a dull reason. Because you were the only girl not as busy as hell' (p. 265). Therese at this point can laugh at her own naïve romanticism.

Highsmith also challenges the idea that developing a sexual relationship should mean cutting off from close friends or not maintaining and building friendships with other women. Therese is initially puzzled by Carol's mysterious close friendship with Abby, who is always there, standing out from the background. Before they have become lovers Therese asks Carol who Abby is.

Carol replies simply, 'Abby is my best friend' (p. 73). Therese at first experiences Abby as a threat and rival to her developing relationship with Carol, particularly when Abby engineers a meeting alone with her, to, as it appears, check out her motives for wanting to get to know Carol. Later she discovers that Carol and Abby have also been lovers and at one time set up a furniture shop together, but that their sexual relationship had ended after two months. Therese is confused by Carol's revelations that she can fall in and out of love with someone so quickly and sees Carol as being cynical about love. Towards the end Therese has accepted Abby's close friendship with Carol. It is Abby who has kept a watch on Carol's interests while she has been away on a trip with Therese and who informs Carol that her husband had engaged a private detective to follow them. It is also Abby who remains in contact with Therese and sends her money so that she can return to New York and talk to Carol, who had to return alone to fight for custody of her daughter.

Therese also learns from Carol the importance of valuing women's friendships in other ways. There is a curious incident at the beginning of the book when Therese makes friends with a fifty-year-old woman who works at the department store. Therese is initially repelled by Mrs Robicheck's age, her physical disabilities and ugliness. But then when the woman asks her to come and talk to her sometimes in the store, 'the woman's ugliness disappeared, because her reddish brown eyes behind the glasses were gentle and interested in her. Therese could feel her heart beating, as if it had come to life' (p. 7).

A few days later she approaches Mrs Robicheck outside the store and is invited to eat with her. Therese accepts and Mrs Robicheck offers her a dress she has made when she had her own dress shop. While Therese is trying on the dress, she again becomes repelled by Mrs Robicheck, who becomes in her imagination 'the hunchback keeper of the dungeon'. Therese waits until Mrs Robicheck falls asleep and then 'escapes'. The significance of this apparently incongruous episode does not become apparent till much later when, on a month's trip with Carol, Therese thinks about sending a present to Mrs Robicheck, but she hesitates. Carol tells her to send the present, as if stressing the importance of maintaining the friendship with the older woman. Later in the novel when Carol has broken with Therese, in order to be allowed to maintain contact with her daughter, Therese in her less naïve state independently keeps up her friendship with Mrs Robicheck by writing to her.

Therese wants to spend all her time alone with Carol on their trip, but Carol befriends a widowed woman who is taking a holiday of her own. Mrs French was 'about seventy, with a Maryland accent and a hearing aid,

ready to get out the car and climb anywhere, though she had to be helped every foot of the way' (p. 203). When Therese questions why they have to go everywhere with Mrs French, Carol asks her, 'Did you ever think you might be seventy-one, too, some day?' (p. 205).

Throughout the development of their relationship, Carol attempts to warn Therese against idealising lesbian relationships in a patriarchal world that regards women as male possessions. She describes the way her husband, Harge, had picked her out 'like a rug for his living room' (p. 125). Later, after she and Therese have become lovers, she tells Therese how he tried to control her and resented her having any independent life of her own. In conversation with Therese she states:

'You know that, don't you . . . in the eyes of the world it [lesbianism] is an abomination.'

The way she said it Therese could not quite smile. 'You don't believe that.'

'People like Harge's family [do].'

'They're not the whole world.'

'They are enough. And you have to live in the world.'

(p. 189)

It is following this episode that they discover that Harge has engaged a private detective to follow them and that Carol's custody of her daughter is threatened. Thus Highsmith emphasises that a lesbian relationship cannot be a romantic escape from the world.

It is Carol's breaking off her relationship with Therese, in order to be allowed to maintain contact with her child, that finally disillusions Therese of her own beliefs that love means you invest all of yourself in the lover relationship. Therese initially experiences Carol's actions as betrayal, yet she very quickly recovers and sets about furthering her career as a stage designer.

While the novel ends in an anticlimax when she and Carol do finally agree to live with each other (the happy ending so often quoted and which appears at odds with the rest of the plot), both characters have gained more autonomy in the process. Carol has had to give up any aspirations to have access to her daughter, because she wouldn't agree to stop being a lesbian, but has taken a job and has not been destroyed by her custody battle, and Therese has realised that she shouldn't sacrifice her career for the sake of a lover relationship.

'WHICH ONE OF US IS GOING TO KILL THE OTHER FIRST?': NON-MONOGAMY AND COMMUNITY IN
SISTER GIN

Sister Gin (1975) by June Arnold stands out as a novel emerging from the American lesbian feminist movement of the 1970s which presents a direct critique of

the ideal of the long-term, sexually monogamous lesbian relationship. The main narrative of the novel deals both humorously and at times very painfully with the disintegration of the twenty-year-old domestic relationship of two middle-aged white women, Su and Bettina.

The novel opens with Bettina, an alcoholic, still in bed in the late afternoon, waiting for Su to come home from work. In these opening pages Arnold brilliantly satirises the notion of a safe haven from the world that is represented in the ideal domestic relationship of *Patience and Sarah*. In bed (the symbol of domestic harmony and bliss), Bettina fantasises about her love for Su, their lovemaking and the security that their relationship represents.

It was five when she woke up smiling. Su would be home soon, would hold her more, would tell her what her raw mind had to know—that the day was fine, that they two were safe now from work, from money, from traffic and jostles of the street; that they two needed only a couch and a tiny space to rock each other in.

(p. 4)

Bettina literally shuts out the world by keeping it always dark: 'Other people did not expect dusk at five o'clock in August North Carolina. In Bettina's room it was always as dusk as she could make it. But not empty: Su's smell of herbal handlotion and brazen aftersex pricked her nostrils.' There is a problem though. Bettina finds she cannot summon the effort to get out of bed, and the safe haven becomes almost like a prison. There is also the constant fear of Su leaving her: 'Suppose she [Su] doesn't come back?' When Su returns, Bettina's worst fears are realised. We learn that Su is acknowledging to herself that she doesn't love Bettina any more and they quarrel. Su asks, 'Which one of us is going to kill the other first?' (p. 10).

Their quarrel is interrupted by a visit from Mamie Carter, an independent seventy-seven-year-old woman who is an ex-actress and a contemporary of Bettina's mother. During this visit Mamie Carter introduces her theory that 'people don't drink enough', that if enough gin is drunk it can liberate the brain into creativity.

'Sister Gin' becomes Su's *alter ego*. It is through her that Arnold introduces a device whereby Su begins to question her own beliefs about relationships. Sister Gin makes her question the value of Bettina's nurturance in their relationship through stating:

You are smothered by Bettina and her mothering, her breast which works in reverse to suck back juices from your mouth. Her reassurances leave you filled with rage, to vent into soft air.

The best women do not see beyond their daily pleasures; what makes them feel good is no more than what has always set women up—flattery, prettiness and smiles, attention.

(p. 69)

After she commences a sexual 'affair' with Mamie Carter, she also debates the meaning of monogamy between women:

S. G.: Monogamy is the old-fashioned arrangement whereby one partner profits at the expense of the other. It means only possession.

It means to be possessed by love.

And assurance that the offspring of the fickle woman is also the offspring of the named, will-writing male.

(p. 145)

In reply to this, Su argues that when you are old the meaning of monogamy between women in a relationship changes, because there is no long term as old women die.

Bettina also has her moments of self-realisation. She becomes aware that she has seen Su's love as something that would make her strong, rather than the opposite.

But their relationship does not immediately end. Their roles almost reverse when Su loses her job as a book reviewer on the town's conservative daily newspaper for writing a radical feminist critique of a new best-seller. Su also becomes an alcoholic as she struggles to find herself as a radical writer. Bettina becomes the strong one, who takes a job as a television reviewer on the same newspaper and whose work becomes her security. It is Bettina who then ceases to love Su, as she sees her job threatened by Su's disintegrating lifestyle and her radical feminist activism against pornography and rape.

By the end of the book, Su and Bettina's domestic relationship is over. Bettina's insecurities have been transferred to fears about losing her job. Su has overcome her own fears and insecurities through entering a politically active community of woman-identified women. She calls on all women to enter this community, to 'come in free'.

In this novel Arnold has exploded the myth of the lesbian couple as protective and life-sustaining; rather she portrays it as 'debilitating', working against women's autonomy and preventing women from 'opening out into the world of politics and communal activity' (Zimmerman, p. 93). She poses the possibility of open-ended relationships operating in a politically active woman-identified community that will free all women. But it is also on this level that the novel fails to some extent to work because the women's community which is portrayed is fantastical, and, as Arnold recognises in her Epilogue, also profoundly racist, since it excludes and fails to give a voice to black women.

Sister Gin has been represented as ground-breaking in that it challenges ageist stereotypes and portrays both the menopause and old age as positive and liberating

for women.⁴ But the politically active community of women in the book, which is set in a conservative medium-sized town in the Deep South, is not only old, *it is also white and extremely rich*. Some of the women also have black servants. It is these old rich women who have formed a subversive action group against the rapes that are taking place in the town.

While there are some hilarious scenes where the women, in between playing bridge, capture the perpetrators of rape, strip them naked and tie them to boards to be put on display in public areas of the town, there is also a sense of unreality about their actions. It is hard to imagine that, since they have so much invested in the status quo, they would actually take such risks.

Arnold is also careful to make all the rape perpetrators white, and one of the rape victims black (in fact, she is the daughter of one of the women's servants), but the views of the black women involved are not heard in the main body of the novel, and nor are the black women given an opportunity for political activism. Arnold belatedly recognises this lack of subjectivity accorded to the black women in an Epilogue which she devotes to May, Bettina's mother's black servant:

Miss Su, you haven't forgotten *May*. Oh, I know I'm in there moving around the table, going through the door, but I'm not there. Now you know how you were feeling when those books put you in them. They let you move around a little while and then go on out the door. You didn't *say* anything but pretty soon you got you a Sister Gin to say it for you.

(p. 206)

But Arnold's solution is ultimately to evade giving black women a voice, because she feels she cannot authentically represent them; instead she leaves it up to black women themselves.

In the end her vision of feminist community remains as romanticised as the ideal of the romantic couple relationship which she demolishes, because there is little recognition of the different power positions between women. It was to take black feminism to stress that any sense of political community and friendship between women was something that had to be worked at and could not just be assumed.

'I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE YOUR FRIEND':
FRIENDSHIP, POWER AND CONFLICT IN *THE*
THRESHING FLOOR

The community of women in Barbara Burford's novella *The Threshing Floor* (1986) is far from idealised. Rather Burford stresses that in order for women to be able to work together on common projects, conflicts brought about by personal friendships and differences of inequality have to be recognised and addressed. Through set-