

**Pocketknives, Hoodies, and Quilts:  
A Lesbian Reader**

By Cecilia Kiely

Published in *Sinister Wisdom* (Issue 105, July 2017)

*A note on the format: It's a patchwork and the threads aren't always neatly tied. Let's call it a quilt. You can make a quilt out of flannel and denim and plaid and old ripped hooded sweatshirts. And you can drape it on anything—your futon, your cat, the backseat of your Subaru.*

“This is not a quote-unquote real novel,” Eileen Myles says about *Cool for You*. “It’s my kind of novel—pasted together and funky. While writing this book, I thought, It’s going to explain more than novels are supposed to; it’s just going to do any fucking thing it wants to do, and then I’m going to say it’s a novel when I’m done.”

I read to fill in my sketchy background in lesbian literature. I thought the first step would be simple—read works by lesbian writers—but hadn’t anticipated a fundamental problem: I

**Liz Lemon:** I’m on humanity leave.

**Jack Donaghy:** Good God, what Indigo Girls song is that from?

**Lemon:** “Syllabus of Us.” It’s off *Vagabonds, Martyrs and Quilts*.

don’t know what a lesbian writer is. I had never even considered that Faulkner might be one. Researching the elusive lesbian narrative took over my reading: I went through every book in the library with these two highly contested terms as keywords, hopping from

theorist to critic hoping to get to the source—which as far as I could tell was only a deep well of loneliness. And not even *The Well of Loneliness* because can that even be considered a lesbian narrative if the narrator/author is a self-hating invert?

Though my reading list was formed around the idea of defining a literary tradition, I was ultimately not interested in debating what makes a book lesbian or not lesbian. I wanted to know instead why I write like I do and how it relates to my being queer. From this angle, I was able to see how my writing has been shaped by the kind of reader I am.

Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, was published in 1982, the year I was born. She called it “biomythography.”

I am a lesbian reader. I have always “read into” things and this is not because I am a natural academic, but rather because I grew up trying to find my lesbian story in heterosexual narratives. I adapted, claiming stories as my own even before realizing why or how I was doing it. From the way I read books like *My Antonia* in high school to the way that I connect with lesbian writers such as Alison Bechdel and Eileen Myles today, my experiences as a lesbian reader have informed my writing.

Reading between the lines is not hard to do when you grow up with an eye for the unspoken. Who else but other queers have a classic film canon of movies that don't even acknowledge their existence? *Thelma & Louise. A League of Their Own.* They even turned *Fried Green Tomatoes* into just another hetero narrative, removing the explicit (i.e. acknowledged) lesbian romance before making the book into a movie.

That's the beauty of it. You can make a lesbian movie that also caters to straight women. Just create an unnecessary plot line with an attractive male love interest (e.g. *Bend It Like Beckham*). We can always see what is really going on. Plus, we love yet another chance to calibrate our lesbian specs.

I write *for* the lesbian reader, but I write to *create* lesbian readers as well. I attempt to re-create my own reading experience for others through the way I write literary collage.

Looking at what it means for me to be a lesbian reader, I also explore how this type of reading can connect individuals and form a unique lesbian literary culture. Examining how we must often create our own narratives as both readers and writers, I find ways that lesbians use storytelling to claim space and resist stereotypes. Relating these ideas to my own writing, I look for ways to connect with other lesbians while also engaging the lesbian reader in all of us.

This is my relationship to my reading—an understanding of how my lesbian lens affects the way that I read and write. This is my critical essay—pasted together.

### I | The Lesbian Reader

*In which we put on our specs and start seeing lesbians everywhere.*

Reading like a lesbian can mean uncovering your own story in a heterosexual narrative the same way you discovered your queer identity in a heteronormative world. For me, reading as a lesbian means making meaning of snippets, patching together scraps I take as clues, and going beyond the limits of what is written on the page. Being queer requires a closer reading of social situations, a constant negotiation of identity, so it's no wonder that I grew into a literature student who enjoyed going beneath the surface of texts. I have always approached my reading with the idea that the hidden story is often the more interesting one.

I went to see the doctor of philosophy/with a poster of Rasputin and a beard down to his knee/He never did marry, or see a B-grade movie/He graded my performance/He said he could see through me/I spent four years prostrate to the higher mind/I got my paper and I was free.

—Indigo Girls, “Closer to Fine”

I read with what Gillian Hanscombe calls “lesbian specs” (111). (She’s British.) She writes, “Sometimes being a lesbian reader is rather like being one of the favoured few in the cinemas of the 1950’s who were given red and green specs so they could see the breathtaking perspectives of the new 3-D movies. Audiences without the specs saw only the usual thing; and sometimes not even all of that. But with the specs, all was revealed” (111). Of course, the usual thing is a heterosexual plot.

Sally Munt, referring to Roland Barthes distinction between “readerly” (lisible) and “writerly” (scriptible), suggests that the “lesbian culture’s ability to be so *writerly*” is because “lesbian readers must rewrite texts, heterosexual or lesbian, as they read” (qtd. in Farwell 7). Again this tendency reflects the way lesbians exist in the world. Lacking the social scripts that straight people take for granted, queers are often left to write their own.

Every book is a lesbian book.

It makes sense—if you’re not given a narrative you either have to create one for yourself or continue to exist in the margins. “Reading into things” is an adaptation, a survival mechanism. The facts are usually not on our side, not playing for our team. Nancy Drew has a boyfriend. So you search for the story between the facts.

–Dorothy Allison

For me, this literal marginalization creates a desire to represent personal experiences in my work in order to give still underrepresented stories space on the printed page. But more importantly, my experience as a reader gives me an awareness of, and an appreciation for, what is left unwritten.

Everyone says that their first lesbian book was Radclyffe Hall’s wretched “Well of Loneliness,” but that didn’t do it for me. . . . If you limit the list to self-defined lesbian books, then we get down to just one: Rita Mae Brown’s “Rubyfruit Jungle.” But looking for self-defined lesbian books was never how I approached the subject. I always reinterpreted books to give me what I needed. All books were lesbian books — if they were believable about women at all, and particularly if they were true to my own experience.

–Dorothy Allison

According to Nicky Hallet, author of *Lesbian Lives: Identity and Auto/biography in the Twentieth Century*, “Lesbian readers are hungry readers. . . . For a heterosexual woman, the idea that she should seek out evidence that there are others around is nonsensical. Detecting testimony

of other lesbian existence is an occupational habit of lesbians. Signs of life are sought in many places. This sounds desperate: it is often celebratory, and most of all it is habit forming” (ix).

For many lesbian readers, looking for these signs of life starts early. In childhood I quickly picked up on the ways in which I was different from other girls, but I didn’t have a way to make sense of these differences. Knowing the typical girl narrative did not fit, I gravitated towards books about boys—the Hardy Boys over Nancy Drew, even *Little Men*, a little-known sequel, over the classic *Little Women*. Though I enjoyed *Little Women* much more than I thought

The books we read when we were children shaped our lives; at least they shaped our imaginings, and it is with our imaginings that we live.

–Willa Cather

I would when I eventually read it, possibly because of a lesbian subtext I picked up on; though any complexity was lost on me, I remember at least finding tomboyish Jo to be more interesting than most other girls I had read about. Of course, in the end she gets married.

In high school English class, I didn’t realize that I was reading *My Ántonia* as a lesbian reader since I didn’t even identify as a lesbian. If pressed to articulate why I unexpectedly enjoyed the book, I might have guessed that it had something to do with the way Ántonia was called alternately by her full name and by the nickname Tony. I had always been jealous of girls with androgynous names. But looking back, the main reason the story resonated was because it had been written by a lesbian, though I didn’t know it at the time. The novel struck a chord with me because it expressed the same latent dissatisfaction I was beginning to feel with the heterosexual plot, though I couldn’t name that either.

As Lillian Faderman notes in her anthology of lesbian writing, *Chloe + Olivia*, a “lesbian sensibility often reveals itself” even in novels like *My Ántonia* that on the surface appear to fit

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself.

–Willa Cather

into the heterosexual narrative (443-4). She says, “That sensibility is suggested sometimes by an expression of strong feminist values—a jaundiced look at heterosexual institutions such as marriage, a yearning for agency and independence—coupled with a determined flexibility in the conception of gender roles. It is suggested more subtly by the gaze that falls lovingly on the female image and the blurred

presentation of the male image” (444). The beauty of lines like Lena’s, “I don’t want to marry Nick, or any other man” (Cather 80), is that they work equally well for just a regular old independent badass pioneer woman as they do for a badass lesbian pioneer woman.

In *My Antonia*. Cather shows Tony become jealous when Jim tells her that Lena lets him kiss her: “‘Lena does?’ Tony gasped. ‘If she’s up to any of her nonsense with you, I’ll scratch her eyes out!’” (109). Now if that’s not dyke drama, I don’t know what is.

More than ten years after graduating high school, I am now so used to seeing through my lesbian specs (I wear them all the time, not just for

We’re going to do a song that I wrote for Virginia Woolf. I wrote papers about her in college but I didn’t know what I was talking about. And then a few years ago I got a copy—my mom’s a librarian so she gives me all these cool books, or loans them to me, I should say. It was a copy of her abridged diaries and I started reading her diaries— [Fan yells “I love you!” She responds “Love you, too.” Crowd cheers.] Anyway, she became my friend through the pages and it was a connection through time and human beings can affect each other. It’s very profound and how we’re each a part of that so this is what this song is about.

—Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls

Question: Is Tony jealous that he gets to kiss her or that she gets to kiss him instead of her?

Let’s say Jim was a woman instead like Tony and Lena. We would ask:

Is Tony jealous that she gets to kiss her or that she gets to kiss her instead of her?

reading,  
which  
sometimes  
gives me a

And we would see the limitations of pronouns are more pronounced when discussing lesbian relationships.

headache) that often the books on my lesbian list nearly shocked my system. Not that I hadn’t read about lesbians before, but for the first time, reading Michelle Tea and Eileen Myles and Alison Bechdel, it wasn’t me trying to decode closeted or veiled insinuations. These authors were acknowledging a sort of shared experience. They were meeting me halfway, and I didn’t feel like I had to search for the lesbian story—we were on the same page. It’s hard to describe this.

In her graphic memoir *Fun Home*, Bechdel describes buying a Swiss Army knife after getting an unsupportive letter from her mother in response to her coming out. “A symbol of self-reliance?” she wonders. “At any rate, it seemed like something a lesbian would have” (*Fun Home* 78). In at least three of the other books I read, I picked up on references to pocketknives. But here the author was making explicit the subtext I was creating. We were sharing a lesbian joke.

Many of the queer writers I work with are motivated by the idea of “writing the book that you wish you read in high school.” Constantly re-interpreting texts to give you what you need is exhausting, so it’s not surprising that many lesbian (and other queer) readers view writing as a way to make it easier for the next generation of queers to find their stories. But this has always been an abstract concept for me. When I read *Fun Home*, I realized that it was the book I wish I had could have found in seventh grade, not in grad school when I was almost thirty years old.

Another author I wish I had discovered in high school, Dorothy Allison, recognizes that her motivations for writing are tied to the importance that books had in her own childhood. She says that reading books as child was how she “had kept [herself] semi-sane and developed an idea of how to love someone, how to be part of a community and maybe even find happiness” (“Every Book” 1). But these lessons didn’t come from the books themselves, but rather from the way she learned to approach her reading. Not having access to lesbian stories, Allison turned the ones she did have into lesbian narratives. She says, “I had spent my adolescence reinterpreting the reality of every book, movie and television show I had ever experienced — moving everything into lesbian land” (“Every Book” 1). Reading as a lesbian allowed her to create her own ideas of how to live as a lesbian.

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story the only story.

– Chimamanda Adichie

For Bechdel, the process of reading is also closely linked to her process of identifying as a lesbian. She writes, “I realized in the campus bookstore, that I



was a lesbian” (203). We later see the scene of her self-discovery—in bed. But she is alone with a stack of books on the nightstand—*Lesbian/Woman*, *Orlando*, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, *The Well of Loneliness*, *Desert of the Heart*.

But her reading doesn’t stop there. We see her in bed again, and this time she is not alone. A lover is reading aloud from *James and the Giant Peach*: “The walls were wet and sticky, and peach juice was dripping from the ceiling. James opened his mouth and caught some of it on his tongue” (81). In

the picture, they are both naked, except the lover is wearing her glasses to read.

## II | Lesbian Culture

*In which we explore how the lesbian reader fits into the larger culture.*

Lesbian literary culture is not as much a collection of specific texts as it is a lens that connects lesbian readers. Reading as a lesbian can be a way of connecting with other lesbians without getting stuck on defining who or what should be a part of a lesbian canon. Since almost no one is born into lesbian culture, and since it is one of few cultures that people are introduced to through members of their own generation, such as friends or sexual partners rather than older family members, transmitting traditions from one generation to the next has always been a challenge. Either you date an older lesbian, which can be

**A** This symbol, A, following an entry indicates major Lesbian characters and/or action.

**B** This symbol, B, following an entry indicates minor Lesbian characters and/or action.

**C** This symbol, C, following an entry indicates latent, repressed Lesbianism or characters who can be so interpreted. This type of behavior is properly termed “variant” behavior.

**T** This symbol, T, following an entry indicates that regardless of the quantity of Lesbian action or characters involved in the book, the quality is essentially poor. The “T” is for “trash.”

problematic when they see their role as “instructor” rather than partner, or you rely on friends your own age to help you patch together your own ideas of what it means to be a lesbian. Either way, much is lost from generation to generation.

In *The Safe Sea of Women*, a collection of lesbian-feminist literary criticism, Bonnie Zimmerman suggests that lesbians of her generation have created a lesbian culture. “We mix together Sappho, amazons, Gertrude Stein, and Natalie Barney . . . . add bar culture from the fifties; season liberally with new left politics and new age consciousness; strain through traditional literary metaphors; and cover over completely with

In the middle of “*L in L*” (as the *The Lesbian in Literature* was called according to the introduction) is a photo spread that looks like a sixth grade yearbook—badly cropped black and white photos of lesbian authors, from a photo of a bust of Sappho to a portrait of Emily Dickinson to contemporary writers captured in candid shots taken in someone’s backyard or awkward headshots in front of brick walls. One is of a young Mary Oliver wearing what appears to be a black turtleneck and a denim anorak. She’s one of the only poet’s names I recognize, but I don’t recognize her face at first. She’s looking off to the side. I don’t think of Mary Oliver as being young or dykey. I’m not sure how this is important, but it feels like it is.

feminism to produce a lesbian culture” (14). Not only is that lesbian culture they’ve cooked up fairly limited to a white, middle-class perspective as it’s “covered over completely”

Brave and forthright and insightful—exactly what Alison Bechdel does best.

with a feminism that often alienated women of color and working class women, but

—Dorothy Allison’s blurb for *Fun Home*

Zimmerman also overestimates how effectively this new lesbian culture can be passed down. She says, “Today when a woman comes out as a lesbian, she has an identity and a belief system waiting for her should she choose to embrace it” (14). Yet this is exactly the thing—a cultural identity cannot survive if it is static, “waiting” to be embraced. Quickly the culture becomes outdated, less relevant to the younger generation. (Case in point: I have no idea who Natalie Barney is.)

Forming community around common strategies for discovering identity instead of the false notion that lesbians share a single story allows for a more inclusive culture. This makes more sense—the lesbian specs can be developed and nurtured. It’s not about the representation in

A review of *Cool for You* in the *San Francisco Guardian* written by Michelle Tea, no byline just her name in parentheses at the end of the capsule review: “With grace and anger, Myles reveals and accuses; she’s a butch dyke Bukowski whose confessions clear a place at the table for her queer, working-class sisters while hurling bottles at the larger culture that continues to kick them to the curb.”

texts of a lesbian culture or ideal lesbian community, but rather the way that the books themselves are used to connect. For example, in 1981, the third edition of *The Lesbian in Literature* was compiled by Barbara Grier and published by Naiad Press. The first edition had been published

in 1967. This book was essentially a bibliography of every book that was written by a lesbian or written by someone who might be a lesbian, or that had lesbian characters or a character that might be a lesbian, or had a character that would have played softball or wore dungarees if they had the chance.

For over fourteen years, the *L in L*, along with their literary publication *The Ladder*, formed a network of lesbian readers across the country. While ostensibly telling lesbians where to look for lesbians in literature, it was just as much showing lesbian readers that they weren’t alone in their interpretations, that they weren’t the only ones reading the way they did, gauging the sexuality of characters based on subtle clues in the text. In the foreword to the third edition,

Maida Tilchen describes finding novels in a used bookstore, A-B-C-T ratings penciled in. She writes,

Once, in a tiny rural bookstore, I found a book that looked relevant and that had a ‘B’ written on the cover in delicate handwriting. Checking the bibliography, I found that it certainly was a ‘B.’ I felt a great affinity to the unknown woman who had also been using the bibliography. And I felt a great sadness, wondering why she had ever let the book slip back onto the bookstore’s shelves. Had she died and her estate been dispersed? Had she needed the money so desperately that she sold the book? Or, as I discovered after years of book collecting, had her shelves and closets overflowed so much that she regretfully decided to unload some of the less important books?

Notice the stories she tells herself about this previous reader. She creates an entire narrative—multiple narratives even—from a single penciled “B.” Here the facts don’t matter. The “B” could

Eileen Myles’s blurb for *Valencia*: Michelle Tea’s second book is really brave. If you want to know how dangerous and great and awful it is to be a girl, you’ll scarf *Valencia* right up. There’s so much colliding and ‘sharing.’ I mean in the good way—sharing bodies, drugs, stories, and clothes. The street today is full of girls, if you haven’t noticed.

have been an initial of the owner or maybe a grade assigned independent of the lesbian rating guide, perhaps by an overzealous writing professor compelled to grade all his books like student papers. It’s not the actual story but the story that

Tilchen is able to construct for herself

from these clues. Here we see inherent *writerliness* of the lesbian reader.

Just like the *L in L* itself, this story is about claiming these signs of life, validating them, saying to yourself, “See, you’re not the only one who thinks Amelia Earhart was a little gay.”

Michelle Tea, another queer working-class writer, who also grew up in the poor outskirts of Boston. In *Valencia* she writes, “I had just discovered Eileen Myles” (57). This comes before mentions of Ani DiFranco (65), and tofu and tahini.

Even though this book was essentially a lesbian canon, or at least a reading list, it wasn’t what was being read that connected lesbians, but rather the way in which they were reading these books. So when Tilchen calls the book the “Legendary Lesbian Treasure Map,” I disagree. If it is a treasure map, it is one that is less about ultimately finding

the treasure than simply finding the map, which tells you you’re not the first one to ever wash up on this island.

### III | Lesbian Storytelling

*In which I read the pocketknife as a lesbian reader and connect a literal carving of space to a figurative one, suggesting the importance of storytelling.*

Lesbians are hungry for stories of other lesbians. Mainly because lesbians are remain erasable, especially in the male-centered heterosexual narrative that we still see continually played out, in everything from novels to car commercials. So we tend to look for the little clues and let our imaginations run wild. One example of my being a hungry reader is the way I picked up on independent references to pocketknives in at least three of the books—*Fun Home*, *Zami*, *Bastard out of Carolina*; it was an object that stuck out to me because of my associations between Swiss Army knives and tomboys. It wasn't enough to simply note this coincidence; I had to make it *mean* something.

On one level, mention of a pocketknife can be seen an easy shorthand to show that the girl is self-reliant. The way that the jackknife can be read in *Bastard* shows why every young lesbian, or at least every independent young girl, needs a pocketknife.

We'll leave the figuring to those we pass on  
the way out of town.

—Indigo Girls, “Get Out the Map”

Drawing on greater implications of the  
object, Allison uses the knife to show the  
importance of changing your own narrative.

What do kids do with pocketknives in books?

They become blood brothers (back in the day). Make literal a bond between friends with whom you feel a kinship but don't share blood.

What else do young people do with pocketknives? Carve their names into branches. Carve their lover's name into the trunk. These etchings are a literal way to stake a claim, make space, the way that writing can in a larger sense. Audre Lorde writes that as a child she used the penknife that her father always carried around in his bathrobe pocket to sharpen her pencils (*Zami* 25).

In *Bastard out of Carolina* Allison also shows this imaginative link between the literal carving power of a knife and the figurative power of narration to create space for marginalized identities; the main character, Bone, highly values both jackknives and storytelling. Expressing the need to have something useful, something to give her power usually reserved for boys and men, Bone says, “Some days I would grind my teeth, wishing I had been born a boy. ... I begged my aunts for Earle's and Beau's old denim workshirts so I could wear them just the way they did when they worked on

It's a biomythography, which is really fiction. It has the elements of biography and history and myth. In other words, it's fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision.

—Audre Lorde, on *Zami*

their trucks, with the front tucked in and the tail hanging out.” Here Allison is not saying, “Bone is a baby dyke,” but by presenting her experience as one where gender is complicated, she conveys something that lesbian readers can identify with, even if they spent their childhoods dressing up in tiaras instead of overalls (or maybe both). Bone is breaking out of the narrative that has been given to her when she was born a girl.

Bone continues, “I followed them around and stole things from them they didn’t really care about—old tools, pieces of chain, and broken engine parts. I wanted most of all a knife like the ones they all carried—a Buck knife with a brass-sand-stained-wood handle or a jackknife



#### How To Use Your Dyke Multi-tool

1. Carve space for yourself
2. Cut (yourself out of) boxes
3. Question everything, especially things men tell you about lesbians
4. Appreciate double entendre
5. Pry the story out from between the lines
6. [Not sure what this is for]
7. Patch together your history & culture
8. Celebrate your coming out (every time)

**WARNING:** This tool should NOT be used to poke your eyeballs out in frustration over not being able to write a coherent essay.

decorated with mother-of-pearl. I found a broken jackknife with a shattered handle that I taped back together around the bent steel tang. I carried that knife all the time until my cousin Grey took pity and gave me a better one” (*Bastard* 23). The actual knife is of no value, broken and tossed aside; it is the power that it represents.

Bone figuratively carves space for herself with her storytelling. Similar to the way Allison does in her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Bone describes how her stories, usually gruesome and full of adventure, captured her younger sisters’ and cousins’ attention. Bone also makes up a game to play with her female cousins; she called it “mean sisters.” When her sister asks what the mean sisters do, Bone responds, “They do

everything their brothers do. Only they do it first and fastest and meanest” (212).

When Bone directs her cousins and sister in playing “mean sisters,” she’s making a place for herself, and other girls like her, by subverting the masculine heroic narrative, disrupting it and reclaiming it. When her uncle laughs at the idea, her cousin Patsy Ann is embarrassed and points at Bone saying, “She told me about it, she told me I could” (213). Bone is giving other

women permission to create their own narratives, and her reaction to the put-down is different; she thinks, “I didn’t care. I played mean sisters for all I was worth” (213). The unexpected twist at the end—“I” rather than “it”—suggests there’s more here than just a child’s imaginative game.

Because lesbians are not given a narrative, they have to create their own. Storytelling has a similar power for Lorde as it does for Allison. In *Zami*, Lorde writes about how her older sisters would whisper each other stories at bedtime: “I thought that the very idea of telling stories and not getting whipped for telling untrue was the most marvelous thing I could think of” (46). She says her sister Helen’s stories “were far and away the best, filled with tough little girls who masqueraded in boys’ clothing and always foiled the criminals, managing to save the day” (46). Again these stories involve challenging gender roles and expected scripts. Lorde writes that her mother taught her, “If you can’t change reality, change your perceptions of it” (18).

If lesbian readers create their own narratives from small clues and encoded material in the text as they read, it makes sense that lesbian writers also reconfigure material as they write their own personal narratives. Using the facts of her life but also weaving in other elements, Lorde retells her story to allow for her existence as both a black woman and a lesbian. Sewing in myth and legend, Lorde connects her Afro-Caribbean heritage to her lesbian

**Jamais real, toujours vrai.**

—Antonin Artaud

(Opening quote of *Cool for You*: “Never real, always true.”)

I am watching YouTube clips of the Indigo Girls—their network TV debut on Letterman, back in the day and you can tell how old it is because when he announces they have a new album, he holds up a record. That and David Letterman has hair. He goes, “Please welcome . . . Indigo Girls!” and they walk out, and there must be some dykes near the audience mics because someone is just going “woooooo!” the whole time. Amy is all punked out in a folk rocky way—black t-shirt, about seven medallions around her neck, and jeans ripped down both thighs. Black acoustic guitar and Emily’s is a classic acoustic guitar, shiny wood. Her blond hair is all ‘80’s feathered; she’s wearing a bright salmon t-shirt tucked into her jeans, short sleeves cuffed. And I start to tear up in the coffee shop. No joke. I feel a debt to these two that I can’t explain.

They are twenty-five, younger than I am now. I was seven and there they were like they were my older cousins on network TV carving out a space for me to grow into being gay.

identity, creating a text in which they are not at odds. *Zami* is “a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers.” This name allows her to

reconcile two aspects of her identity, two cultures she belongs to, without choosing one over the other. The full title is *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Note that Lorde is not claiming a new name but rather what she sees as a re-spelling of it. She is not rejecting a limiting identity, but rather reconciling different aspects of her self.

This same idea is seen as Lorde writes about the first “re-spelling” of her name:

I did not like the tail of the Y hanging down below the line in Audrey, and would always forget to put it on, which used to disturb my mother greatly. I used to love the evenness of AUDRELOLORDE at four years of age, but I remembered to put on the Y because it pleased my mother, and because, as she always insisted to me, that was the way it had to be because that was the way it was. No deviation was allowed from her interpretations of correct (*Zami* 24).

Re-spelling is a revolutionary act; it allows one to take one’s name, one’s identity, from what it “should” be to what it can be. This is the liberating narrative she creates for herself. It is not just

the facts of her life, a simple autobiography, but a story that fuses many narratives into one, creating a unified identity. We usually don’t see these other stories, which is why many lesbian authors

I discovered that my own life was written invisibly, was squashed between the facts, was flying without me like the Twelve Dancing Princesses who shot from their window every night and returned every morning with torn dresses and worn-out slippers.

tend to find forms that allow them to be

—Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*

more multidimensional. This is not a purely literary choice but one that allows them to exist.

This is why lesbian writers often use personal material in novel (no pun intended) ways. Like other marginalized groups, lesbians must be careful to present their stories in ways that resist surface readings. The way that these authors link storytelling with power suggests that for many lesbians subverting the dominant narrative is a personal issue before it is an artistic question.

There is fiction in the space between lines on the page and memories write it down but it doesn’t mean you’re not just telling stories.

Sometimes a lie is the best thing.

—Tracy Chapman, “Telling Stories”

The importance of this type of storytelling is seen in the way that many of these writers use autobiographical elements. The way that lesbian writers negotiate the line between fiction and nonfiction mitigates the danger of the “single story.” The contemporary authors I chose to focus on—Allison, Bechdel, Lorde, Myles, Tea, Winterson—all use autobiographical material in

their work. By expanding the idea of personal narrative, they are able to convey personal stories

in a way that opens up literary possibilities, pushing on the boundaries of genre like lesbian lives push at the limits of the heterosexual narrative. By presenting their stories as fictional autobiography or “biomythography” or as novels that incorporate autobiographical material, these authors forefront the literary without devaluing the political implications of telling their stories. The writers use the political power of storytelling, while avoiding the danger of having their narratives seen as exemplars.

Something that particularly stood out to me was that three of the books I read—*Valencia*, *Cool for You*, and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*—were all novels where the protagonist shared the author’s name. While all three writers play with this author/narrator tension, Winterson gets the most mileage out of

it. Like many writers, she distinguishes the “facts” from the “story”: “There were the ‘facts,’ either threadbare or limiting, then there was the story—which allowed

In *Cool for You*, Myles uses family names to explore relationships, including the one between herself and her grandmother: “I wrote my own name on a pad of paper. Eileen backwards is Nellie. If you turn one of the *e*’s into an *l*” (165-6).

Genre is gender if you add a *d* and switch the last two letters around. But the relationship is even stronger than that. Both come from Latin *gener-* meaning kind or sort, the word “gender” even developing in Middle English from French *genre*. Gender is used to sort people the way genre sorts literature. Whether we encounter more resistance for expanding genre or gender depends only on the investments of the audience.

all kinds of possibilities. Much later, in my 2000 novel *The PowerBook*, I wrote: ‘I can change the story. I am the story.’ The freedom of narrative is infinite.” Rather than being limited by narrative, Winterson is freed by it. She takes ownership of her story.

But what I find much more interesting is how she answers the question in a March 13, 2010 article in *The Times*. Winterson writes of *Oranges*, “The main character in the book is called Jeanette—and so am I. The book is about a young girl, working class, gay, raised in a fanatically religious environment. And yes, those are the broad facts of my life. But I wanted to use myself as both a fiction and a fact because that is how I understood my relationship to the world.”

**Eileen Myles is a genius.**

—Dorothy Allison’s blurb for *Cool for You*

Though this is not an idea unique to lesbian writers, I think it is one that has a particular resonance with lesbians. Even today, lesbians and other queers must be able to relate to the world

in a way that is both fact and fiction. Closeted lesbians are often said to be “living a lie,” a phrase that suggests not simply that they are hiding something but that their reality, their life, is false.

“I’m only supposed to tell one story at a time, one story. Every writing course I ever heard of said the same thing. Take one story, follow it through, beginning, middle, end. I don’t do that. I never do.

Behind the story I tell is the one I don’t.

Behind the story you hear is the one I wish I could make you hear.

Behind my carefully buttoned collar is my nakedness, the struggle to find clean clothes, food, meaning, and money. Behind sex is rage, behind anger is love, behind this moment is silence, years of silence.”

–Dorothy Allison

Many lesbians can pass as heterosexuals in at least some situations, and they find themselves constantly negotiating when and how they should “come out.” Though the narrative of “coming out” is often seen as the big coming of age moment, the reality of the situation is that coming out is not a one-time thing.

The split between fact and fiction is a cognitive dissonance that Winterson feels toward her own name:

I felt that ‘Jeanette’ was as good a disguise as any, partly because I did not relate to my name. I don’t mean that I wish I was called Esmerelda, but from the first, my close friends have all called me something else, usually JW, or some variant of their own. Then, about a year ago, I discovered that I have another name, because I wasn’t adopted until I was six months old. Naming had a hidden resonance for me; though I did not know it consciously at the time. I was and was not “Jeanette.”

The name at once fits and doesn’t fit, and it seems like that is a relationship that many lesbians have with the name they claim, whether it is lesbian, gay, dyke, queer, women-oriented woman, etc.

All of these show how you relate to the lesbian culture, which communities you identify with, how you have chosen to construct your own identity. Lorde writes in *Zami*, “But that is why to this day I believe that there have always been Black dykes around—in the sense of

powerful  
and  
women-

The only two Indigo Girls songs I can think of (out of more than 200) that actually say “gay” or “lesbian” are “It’s Alright” and “Second Time Around,” respectively.

oriented women—who would rather have died than use that name for themselves. And that includes my momma” (15). Though names can be a source of identity, they are also divisive. This is another difficulty in constructing a cultural identity as a lesbian—claiming others as part of your history and heritage when they may reject the name you want to claim for them.

I think this speaks to the motivations, conscious and unconscious, of many contemporary lesbian writers. There seemed to be a resistance towards simply replacing the heterosexual

narrative with a new lesbian one, especially a resistance to labels. While many of the texts focus on names, they often question their authority or play on their implication.

Winterson both “was and was not ‘Jeanette.’” Lorde writes that before her friend Gennie committed suicide, she had told her that she was going to kill herself. Lorde says, “I both did and didn’t believe her” (91). The cognitive dissonance of growing up as a lesbian develops into an ability to hold two seemingly contradictory ideas, like “I like girls” and “I’m straight,” and speaks to the ultimate necessity of blending the two into a coherent narrative of identity.

The ability to run multiple narratives simultaneously is shown by these authors as they use pronouns to occupy the space of more than one gender. Myles writes, “This little apartment in Boston’s North End. Crying in my workshirt in my room. Really not a girl anymore. A boy on

I used to hate it when male singers covered female singers songs and vice versa, they changed the pronouns. The Crystals singing, “and then he kissed me” and the Beach Boys changing it to “and then I kissed her” (retaining the masculine subject, of course, in addition to correcting the pronouns). I liked singing along with the Beach Boys. When I heard the Indigo Girls cover the Dire Straits years later and Amy Ray was singing to Juliet—“I’d do the stars with you anytime”—I was in college I finally put it together what I was reacting to when I listened to oldies.

her bed in the world” (100). In *Valencia*, Tea describes a girlfriend: “She was such a boy, Iris, a boy with a crush on her babysitter” (138). Here playing with pronouns is a way these writers use language to exist in a space between the boxes of gender. Pronouns tend to erase the lesbian experience and identity. When everyone is a “she” it becomes too confusing. Yet for all its ambiguity, the English language lacks a gender-neutral pronoun, which affects how attached we are to

categorizing people by gender—without a way to convey both humanity and gender-neutrality at the same time (which rules out “it”) it becomes more important to assign genders.

But there is possibility in the inherent ambiguity of our language, and Myles finds a freedom in this. For her, freedom from gender comes in the form of a misheard word, or rather of an ambiguous name. She writes about her Aunt Anne: “Aunt Dan was like Adrien, Sandy or Lee, a name that means person, not woman or man” (182).

This is what it is about—not that Aunt Dan was a lesbian or a gay uncle or whatever. But that there was a way that one could attempt to escape the gender binary, even if in a subtle and ultimately unsuccessful way. Winterson writes an entire book, *Written on the Body*, with a “genderless” narrator. She is careful to never use pronouns. Some argue that this erases a lesbian

identity. Yet reading it, I had no doubt that it was a lesbian narrator. (For one, the narrator was always wearing shorts.) For me, this celebrates the possibility of language, just like Myles and Tea do when they mix pronouns. This is one way that lesbian writers break out of the boxes of traditional narrative.

These writers also subvert the traditional narrative by signaling to readers in different ways, allowing them to connect with a lesbian audience while at the same time avoiding

There's a recent Tide commercial with the mother sitting on a couch, upholstered in the worst combination of preppie and yuppie, wearing a pink cardigan and white skirt. Her young daughter, in a camouflage hoodie and olive cargo shorts, plays with blocks on the floor.

"Well, we tried the whole pink thing. Nope. All she wants to wear is hoodies. Hoodies and cargo shorts. Getting dirty. Then she left some crayons in her pocket and they went through the wash. I thought all her clothes were ruined. Enter Tide [here is where her voice gets slightly hysterical] and Tide Booster. The stains are gone, so . . . it's kinda too bad. [Fake smile] Another car garage, honey? It's beautiful."

stereotypical readings from non-lesbian readers. A lesbian reader can create an alternative narrative from only bits and pieces and Myles plays on this. In *Cool for You*, she tells us that her family rented their downstairs apartment to two women, but she gives us just the information that she had at the time, knowing she doesn't have to spell it out. Describing one of the women, she says, she "wore a sweatshirt and jeans like me" (175). And to confirm what you're thinking, Myles writes that

her mother "was not very impressed by those ladies but at least they wouldn't have kids" (177). But it's not just that Myles is demonstrating that she doesn't have to say "lesbian;" it's that she's showing us the process of identification, as though she's not quite sure yet but she knows they are alike in some way—she wears "sweatshirts and jeans like me." The lesbian reader is likely to pick up on this association more quickly as it might mimic a similar experience in their own life, or at least the importance of this moment would be on their radar.

Another example of where the narrator's process of identification is highlighted rather than identifying the characters for the reader is the way we meet Bone's Aunt Raylene in *Bastard out of Carolina*. Bone identifies with her aunt, who we learn near the end of the book is in fact a lesbian, but I know that as soon as she is introduced,

We write about the same things everybody writes about. The difference is that the people who populate our poems suffer from the system that we live under rather than benefit from it; therefore our work is considered political.

—Martin Espada

reading her outsider identity as a lesbian identity. Compared to her sisters, Raylene “was quieter, more private, living alone with her dogs and fishing lines, and seemingly happy that way. She

“What Makes a Gay Song?” a Time Entertainment blogger asks. She recognizes that the Indigo Girls are a part of nineties gay culture.

“But is their music gay? Folk music itself is a political form and deeply entrenched in the 1970s lesbian-power movement. The Indigo Girls themselves are two gay ladies. But their songs rarely touch on gay topics. The Indigo Girls are not known for explicit anthems or same-gendered love songs. Yet so much about an Indigo Girls show is very gay.”

Is a love song just like everything else—straight until proven otherwise? How is a love song sung by a lesbian not a gay song?

lesbian (ambiguity intended), but because of her aunt’s independence. Like Myles’s lesbian neighbors, Aunt Raylene is introduced as a character through the young narrator’s eyes, mimicking the experience for the reader.

In this way, these lesbian writers are able to introduce incidental lesbian characters without presenting them as one-dimensional stereotypes. It’s as if Allison (“Every book is a lesbian book”) knows that lesbian readers will pick up on hints in her description of Raylene, and that those same readers will feel validated in the end when she is revealed as a lesbian. Other readers, however, are not reading as closely. Not having a simple label of “lesbian” to put on these independent aunts or sweatshirt-wearing women, these readers are less likely to misread the narrative relevance of the characters.

#### **IV | Why I Write the Way I Do**

*If you grow up reading between the lines, do you end up trying to write that way, too?*

had always lived out past the city limits, and her house was where the older boy cousins tended to go” (178). Bone learns from her cousin Butch that Raylene “had worked for the carnival like a man, cutting off her hair and dressing in overalls. She’d called herself Ray, and with her short, stocky build, big shoulders, and small breasts, I could see how no one questioned her” (179). Bone says, “It was astonishing to imagine running off like that, and I would think about it with wistful longing” (179). Again, it is the process of identification that is emphasized. Bone doesn’t identify with her aunt because she is a

I have always wanted to be subtle—both in the way that young queers test the waters by putting out ambiguous signals and in the way of Djuna Barnes’s “I have a narrative but you will be put to it to find it.”

There is safety in the privacy of being a lesbian reader. Writing as a lesbian is met with more resistance; I feel a need to hedge my bets. Maybe this is why I am drawn to collage. I’ve always delivered jokes deadpan; it’s best if the only ones who know you are telling a joke are the ones who get it.

I saw Dorothy Allison speak in a church full of Seattle queers in 2006. And I thought if this is what a lesbian writer can be, I want to be one.

I want to write for the ones who get it.

Recognizing how, well, recognized I felt when I read *Fun Home* and *Cool for You*, I want to represent my experience because I believe in the power of sharing stories. Dorothy Allison writes:

Sometimes I wonder if books are as lifesaving for teenagers today as they were for me when I was a girl. But then I go to speak to some group and there are those young people clutching books to their hearts, asking me what I am reading with the same kind of desperate passion I felt whenever I went to a library or bookstore. No doubt it is different these days, but that passion still seems to be there. Books are still where some of us get our notions of how the world is, and how it might be (“Every Book”).

But if I actually want to change ideas of how the world might be, I need to reach a beyond those who are already imagining those possibilities on their own. Lesbian readers are adept at changing their worlds to make room for themselves—they have to in order to survive. Readers who belong to the dominant group, however, aren’t forced to change their perceptions; their reality is constantly reproduced for them and so they never have to reconcile their own stories with the stories they read or hear or see.

“Baby, I know you’re not one for bearing witness. And you told me that one wrong move is going to sell you out. And I see that you’ve kept your word and made it harder than it had to be. I wish I could save you the trouble, baby, give you a little peace of mind.”

-Indigo Girls, “Moment of Forgiveness”

My agenda (and, of course, it’s gay): I want to turn everyone into a lesbian reader.

While I want to connect with lesbian readers in the way I’m used to connecting to texts, with asides and veiled references and just enough hints that they know it’s intentional, I also want to create a reading experience for non-lesbian readers that forces them to be aware of how their own lens affects their reading.

Making my writing more associative than narrative, I like to put the ball in the reader’s court. On a basic level, collage writing replicates a lesbian reading experience by putting all

readers in the margins, forcing them to make their own connections between the elements. The collage is about creating your own subtext. If lesbian stories often exist between the lines, squashed between the facts, then the collage is a natural form for sharing them.

But the problem with telling a lesbian story in subtext is that only the lesbian readers get it, and those that don't have the experience or context to make the connections are not going to do the work on their own. The trouble with delivering jokes with a straight face is that the ones who don't get the joke don't realize they missed anything. So how do you create a reading experience where members of the dominant group, who aren't used to questioning their role as the universal reader, are forced to wonder what they are missing?

As I've only recently pinpointed this issue, I don't yet have a solid answer. One attempt I made was a draft of a collage piece, "Billie Jean," that aimed to create a lesbian subtext that

**Emily:** I took classical guitar lessons for a year when I was twelve years old. And then I stopped taking it. I did it for my dad, really. But I have no regrets 'cause it was really great for my technique and you can always benefit from working your hands in that way. It's very difficult actually; it took a lot of practice and discipline. Um it's . . .

**Amy** [interjecting]: It's not necessary.

**Emily:** It's definitely not necessary.

**Amy:** It helps to do some sort of training, but it's not, it's not necessary.

would run below the surface story. One thing I did was when I referenced the idea of U-Haul lesbians, I put it in the form of the original joke: What does a lesbian bring to the second date? I put the punch line in a footnote. In workshop, several minutes of discussion were spent wondering about the effect of waiting until a footnote to get the joke. No one acknowledged that the effect would be different for different readers, that some readers might already know the answer before reading the footnote. Would it be more effective if the footnote didn't

actually give away the punch line? The ability to play around with the different elements of a text is, for me, an exciting way to test out potential answers to this question.

Another way that I try to create a lesbian reading experience is using juxtaposition to bring in the reader's knowledge of certain experiences, even if they are not their own personal experiences. For example, in "Babe" I ask the reader, "Have you ever played the pronoun game?" This is not to alert the lesbian reader that the way Babe referred to her (possible) lover is

related to a queer history of self-policing speech. Rather, I am attempting to signal to a non-queer reader this same connection, creating a context that might not be evoked by the situation otherwise.

But like any other form, the collage essay comes with a set of expectations of what it should be. For example, collagists often use juxtapositions to create new connections between ideas, say, placing an apple next to an orange. The difficulty with this, though, is that depending on your viewpoint, an apple and an orange can either be distinct as they are in our clichéd phrase<sup>1</sup>, creating a dynamic tension when placed side by side. Or you could see them as two fruits, similar in almost every respect. (Maybe you should juxtapose the fruit with heteronormativity.<sup>2</sup>) Instead of focusing on the differentials between the passages or images I place together, I use juxtapositions to allow the reader to see the connections, even if they are ones that have been made before. My intent is not to make novel connections but to offer the reader the materials and lenses of a lesbian. By juxtaposing my own stories with the biographies of others, I am attempting to disrupt the way we have been trained to read.

Is that a valid use of the collage form? As I can imagine Eileen Myles might say, I don't fucking care.

---

<sup>1</sup> Comparing apples to oranges. Did you think I was going to say something gay instead? Like “oranges are not the only fruit”?

<sup>2</sup> J/k.

### Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda. "The Danger of a Single Story." Lecture, TEDGlobal, Oxford, UK, July 2009. [http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html). (Accessed April 9, 2012).
- Allison, Dorothy. *Bastard Out of Carolina*. New York: Plume Books, 1992.
- . "Believing in Literature." *Lesbian Words: State of the Art*. Ed. Randy Turoff. New York: Masquerade Books, 1995.
- . "Every Book Is a Lesbian Book." Salon.com. June 10, 1999. [http://www.salon.com/1999/06/10/lesbian\\_books/](http://www.salon.com/1999/06/10/lesbian_books/)
- . *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. New York: Dutton, 1995.
- Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Barnes, Djuna. *Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts*. Normal, IL : Dalkey Archive Press, 1995.
- Brooks, Caryn. "What Makes a Gay Song?" *Time.com*. June 20, 2008. <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1816760,00.html#ixzz1rrjmFSXO>. (Accessed April 12, 2012).
- Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994.
- Faderman, Lillian, ed. *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*. New York : Viking, 1994.
- Farwell, Marilyn R. *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.
- Grier, Barbara. *The Lesbian in Literature*. Iowa City: Iowa City Women's Press, 1981.
- Hallett, Nicky. *Lesbian Lives: Identity and Auto/biography in the Twentieth Century*. Sterling, VA. : Pluto Press, 1999.
- Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1982.
- Myles, Eileen. *Cool for You*. New York: Soft Skull Press, 2000.
- O'Brien, Shannon. "'The Thing Not Named': Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer." *The Lesbian Issue*. Eds. Estelle B. Freedman, Barbara C. Gelpi, Susan L. Johnson, and Kathleen M. Weston. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985: 67-90.
- Pearlberg, Gerry Gomez. "Myles Ahead." *Time Out New York* 2001
- Saxey, Esther. *Homoplot: The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity*. New

York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008.

Tea, Michelle. *Valencia*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2000.

Tilchen, Maida. Foreword to *The Lesbian in Literature*. By Barbara Grier. Iowa City: Iowa City Women's Press, 1981.

Winterson, Jeanette. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. New York: Grove Press, 1985.

---. *Sexing the Cherry*. New York: Grove Press, 1989.

---. *Written on the Body*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Zimmerman, Bonnie. *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction, 1969-1989*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.