
Introduction

Defining the Context

Sharon Dale Stone

LESBIANS MAKE UP a significant proportion of the Canadian population, but have had very little written about them. For the most part they are hidden from public view and much misunderstood. This book was compiled to bring Canadian lesbians into public view, to correct stereotypes and assumptions, and to present lesbianism as a viable alternative to heterosexuality.

It is not always understood, for instance, that lesbians are not similar to homosexual men. Lesbians are commonly discussed in conjunction with gay men and are often assumed to be merely gay men's female counterparts. Just as many women's studies scholars argue that most of what passes as knowledge about "mankind" is actually about men and ignores women, so many who discuss homosexuality typically speak of the male gay experience to the exclusion of the lesbian experience.

Lesbians are women. This point is crucial for understanding lesbian existence within a heterosexual, patriarchal context. As women, lesbians do not have access to male privilege. No matter how much lesbians might reject traditional notions of femininity (and not all do), they do not have the same access to well-paying jobs that men have, are frequently subjected to sexual harassment, and are as likely to be raped as a heterosexual woman. These realities constitute some of the differences between lesbians and gay men. They make the experience of being lesbian qualitatively different from the experience of being a gay man. Lesbians, in short, are as different from gay men as heterosexual women are different from heterosexual men.

Most girls grow up in an environment that assumes heterosexuality as both the natural and preferred mode of sexual expression. This is what is meant when critics say heterosexuality has been institutionalized.¹ Girls are not likely to hear anything positive about lesbianism – if they ever hear of it at all. The dominant culture largely erases evidence of lesbian

existence or, when it cannot be ignored, presents lesbianism as either: a) a deviant way of life (abnormal, perverted, pitiable, abhorrent); or b) "kinky" sexual behaviour that is harmless so long as the women involved remain available for the pleasure of men.²

Too many girls have grown up and continue to grow up believing that unless they find a man to marry, they are destined to become lonely "old maids."³ Girls do not need to be told this explicitly for the message to sink in – though the message often is explicit. They get the message readily enough from popular books, movies, TV programs. They get it from as simple an activity as playing the children's card game "Old Maid." No one wants the old maid. It is small wonder that most women, including many lesbians, grow up to marry a man and produce children. Not only is this what women are taught to do, but this prescription is also presented to them as the only way to find happiness and fulfilment (Catholic girls also have the option of becoming nuns).⁴

In contemporary psychoanalytic theory, there is the implicit recognition that, at least for women, heterosexuality is learned behaviour.⁵ Essentially, this complex insight acknowledges the primacy of the mother / daughter bond and the corresponding secondary nature of girls' and women's attachments to men. At puberty, girls are expected to redirect their interest away from women. That so many women in fact do this is often taken as evidence that heterosexuality is "innate." Given the evidence, this is not a logical conclusion. There are, as contemporary theorists such as Adrienne Rich and Janice Raymond have separately pointed out, many prac-

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1 On heterosexuality as an institution, see "Not for Lesbians Only" and "Learning from Lesbian Separatism" in Charlotte Bunch, *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987); Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 5 (Summer 1980), pp. 631–637; Janice Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (London: The Women's Press, 1986).

2 Lesbianism is conspicuously absent from high-school curricula, and if lesbianism is discussed at all in university courses it is generally in abnormal psychology or sociology of deviance courses; even then, only male homosexuality is usually mentioned.

3 There is a great deal of evidence that never-married old women lead happy and fulfilling lives, including busy social lives. See, for example, Barbara Levy Simon, *Never Married Women* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), and Jeanette Auger's chapter in this book. On the attitudes of contemporary Canadian teenage girls, see Myrna Kostash, *No Kidding: Inside the World of Teenage Girls* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987).

4 See Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan (eds.), *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* (Tallahassee, FL: Naiad, 1985). The book includes Canadian contributions.

5 For example, the work of Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1978), and Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and the Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

tical reasons for assuming a heterosexual way of life – reasons that have nothing to do with sexual attraction.

Historically, women and men have tended to marry, not for reasons of romantic love, but for economic and other practical reasons (for example, for social standing, to have legitimate children). This is not to say that women and men never fell in love with each other.

History books are filled with examples of heterosexual romance. Yet the idea that love and marriage go together is relatively recent. For the upper classes, marriage has traditionally represented the opportunity to increase family fortunes and solidify family ties, and the dictates of the sexual division of labour have meant that women and men in all classes have needed to form unions for economic survival.⁶

The idea of companionate marriage – a union based on friendship and sexual satisfaction – did not become a common goal until the 1920s. Prior to that, few people really believed that women and men could find total fulfilment together. The prevailing ideology held that women and men belonged to separate spheres. Women's sphere was the private world of domesticity; men's sphere was the public world outside the home (this ideology has far from disappeared).

Much has been written recently on the Victorian belief that the sexes did not have much in common with each other, and on the implications of that belief. In particular, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has argued that intimate and loving friendships between women were casually accepted in eighteenth-century nineteenth-century American society.⁷ It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that love between women began to be seen as suspect, or deviant. Lillian Faderman provides convincing evidence that the women's movement, along with women's growing economic independence, figured prominently in the redefinition of passionate love affairs between women as sick. For the first time in modern history, unprecedented numbers of women were able to make their way in the world without being tied to men.⁸ Christina Simmons makes a similar argument concerning the emergence of the twentieth-century perception of lesbianism as a threat to be guarded against.⁹

Putting Women First

The word "lesbian" has become a scare word, to be hurled at any woman who does not conform to conventional notions of femininity. These conventional notions include the idea that women exist for the pleasure of men – not simply for men's sexual pleasure, but also to nurture men, bolster their egos, and raise their progeny. It is a word that is used to divide women from each other, to keep them from discovering that it is possible to find happiness and fulfilment without men. Feminists in particular are commonly suspected of being lesbians, because feminists believe, among other things, that women matter. This idea radically challenges the patriarchal underpinnings of society. The suspicion that feminists are "really" lesbians lies behind the fear many women have of being seen as feminist. Thus, many women will preface statements such as "I believe in equal rights for women" with "I'm not a feminist, but. . . ." By qualifying a feminist statement in this manner, women are able to hold feminist beliefs yet continue to see themselves and be seen by others in conventional society as "normal" – not lesbian man-haters.

It is significant that lesbians are so commonly perceived as man-haters. This view dramatically underscores the misogynist foundation of conventional society.¹⁰ Only a woman-hating society could assume that women who love other women must therefore hate men.¹¹ It seems to be stretching credulity for many people to think that men could be irrelevant for some women. The love that lesbians have for other women rarely has much to do with their feelings towards men. Lesbians are women who love other women. ❧

10 See, for example, Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E.P. Burton, 1974), also Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, Cal.: The Crossing Press, 1983).

11 This is not to say that there are no lesbians who hate men. It must be remembered, though, that there are many heterosexual women who also hate men. That lesbians are singled out and stereotyped as man-haters is an indication of the lengths to which conventional society will go to keep women in line.

6 See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

7 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 1 (Autumn 1975), pp. 1–19. There is every reason to assume that relations within and between the sexes were similar in early Canadian society.

8 Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981); also her article "The Morbidification of Love between Women by 19th-Century Sexologists," in *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 4 (Fall 1978), pp. 73–89.

9 Christina Simmons, "Companionate Marriage and the Lesbian Throat," in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 4 (Lesbian History Issue, Fall 1979), pp. 54–59.

Man Royals and Sodomites

Some Thoughts on the Invisibility of Afro-Caribbean Lesbians

Makeda Silvera

I WILL BEGIN with some personal images and voices about woman-loving. These have provided a ground for my search for cultural reflections of my identity as a Black woman artist within the Afro-Caribbean community of Toronto. Although I focus here on my own experience (specifically, Jamaican), I am aware of similarities with the experience of other Third World women of colour whose history and culture has been subjected to colonization and imperialism.

I spent the first thirteen years of my life in Jamaica among strong women. My great-grandmother, my grandmother and grand-aunts were major influences in my life. There are also men whom I remember with fondness – my grandmother’s “man friend” G., my Uncle Bertie, his friend Paul, Mr. Minott, Uncle B., and Uncle Freddy. And there were men like Mr. Eden, who terrified me because of stories about his “walking” fingers and his liking for girls under age fourteen.

I lived in a four-bedroom house with my grandmother, Uncle Bertie, and two female tenants. On the same piece of land, my grandmother had other tenants, mostly women and lots and lots of children. The big verandah of our house played a vital role in the social life of this community. It was on that verandah that I received my first education on “Black women’s strength” – not only from their strength, but also from the daily humiliations they bore at work and in relationships. European experience coined the term “feminism,” but the term “Black women’s strength” reaches beyond Eurocentric definitions to describe what is the cultural continuity of my own struggles.

* * *

The verandah. My grandmother sat on the verandah in the evenings after all the chores were done to read the newspaper *People* – mostly women – gathered there to discuss “life.” Lite covered every conceivable topic – economic, local, political, social, and sexual: the high price of saltfish, the scarcity of flour, the nice piece of yellow yam bought at Coronation market, Mr. Lam, the shopkeeper who was taking “liberty” with Miss Inez, the fights women had with their menfolk, work, suspicions of Miss Iris and Punsie carrying on something between them, the cost of school books. . . .

My grandmother usually had lots of advice to pass on to the women on the verandah, all grounded in the Bible. Granny believed in Jesus, in good and evil and in repentance. She was

also a practical and sociable woman. Her faith didn’t interfere with her perception of what it meant to be a poor Black woman; neither did it interfere with our Friday night visits to my Aunt Marie’s bar. I remember sitting outside on the piazza with my grandmother. Two grand-aunts and three or four of their women friends. I liked their flashy smiles and I was fascinated by their independence, ease, and their laughter, I loved their names – Cherry Rose, Blossom, Jonesie, Poinsettia, Ivory, Pearl, Iris, Bloom, Dahlia, Babes. Whenever the conversation came around to some “big ’oman talk” – who was sleeping with whom or whose daughter just got “fallen,” I was sent off to get a glass of water for an adult, or a bottle of Kola champagne. Every Friday night I drank as much as half a dozen bottles of Kola champagne, but I still managed to hear snippets of words, tail ends of conversations about women together.

In Jamaica, the words used to describe many of these women would be “Man Royal” and / or “Sodomite.” Dread words. So dread that women dare not use these words to name themselves. They were names given to women by men to describe aspects of our lives that men neither understood nor approved.

I heard “sodomite” whispered a lot during my primary school years, and tales of women secretly having sex, joining at the genitals, and being taken to the hospital to be “cut” apart were told in the schoolyard. Invariably, one of the women would die. Every five to ten years the same story would surface. At times, it would even be published in the newspapers. Such stories always generated much talking and speculation from “Bwoy dem kinda gal naasti sahl!” to some Wise old woman saying, “But dis caan happen, after two shutpan caan join” – meaning identical objects cannot go into the other. The act of loving someone of the same sex was sinful, abnormal 7 something to hide. Even today, it isn’t unusual or uncommon to be asked, “So how do two ’omen do it? what unoo use for a penis? who is the man and who is the ’oman?” It’s inconceivable that women can have intimate relationships that are whole, that are not lacking because of the absence of a man. It’s assumed that women in such relationships must be imitating men.

The word “sodomite” derives from the Old Testament. Its common use to describe lesbians (or any strong independent woman) is peculiar to Jamaica – a culture historically and strongly grounded in the Bible. Although Christian values have dominated the world, their effect in slave colonies is particular. Our foreparents gained access to literacy through the Bible when they were being indoctrinated by missionaries. It

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provided powerful and ancient stories of strength, endurance, and hope which reflected their own fight against oppression. This book has been so powerful that it continues to bind our lives with its racism and misogyny. Thus, the importance the Bible plays in Afro-Caribbean culture must be recognized in order to understand the historical and political context for the invisibility of lesbians. The wrath of God “rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah” (Genesis 19:23). How could a Caribbean woman claim the name?

When, thousands of miles away and fifteen years after my school days, my grandmother was confronted with my love for a woman, her reaction was determined by her Christian faith and by this dread word sodomite – its meaning, its implication, its history.

And when, Bible in hand, my grandmother responded to my love by sitting me down, at the age of twenty-seven, to quote Genesis, it was within the context of this tradition, this politic. When she pointed out that “this was a white people ting,” or “a ting only people with mixed blood was involved in” (to explain or include my love with a woman of mixed blood), it was a strong denial of many ordinary Black working-class women she knew.

It was finally through my conversations with my grandmother, my mother, and my mother’s friend five years later that I began to realize the scope of this denial that was intended to dissuade and protect me. She knew too well that any woman who took a woman lover was attempting to walk on fire – entering a “no man’s land.” I began to see how commonplace the act of loving women really was, particularly in working-class communities. I realized, too, just how heavily shame and silence weighed down this act.

A Conversation with a Friend of My Mother

Well, when I was growing up we didn’t hear much ’bout woman and woman. They weren’t “suspect.” There was much more talk about “batty man businesses” when I was a teenager in the 1950s.

I remember one story about a man who was “suspect” and that every night when he was coming home, a group of guys use to lay wait him and stone him so viciously that he had to run for his life. Dem time, he was safe only in the day

Now with women, nobody really suspected. I grew up in the country and I grew up seeing women holding hands, hugging-up, sleeping together in one bed and there was no question. Some of this was based purely on emotional friendship, but I also knew of cases where the women were dealing but no one really suspected. Close people around knew, but not everyone. It wasn’t a thing that you would go out and broadcast. It would be something just between the two people,

Also one important thing is that the women who were involved carried on with life just the same, no big political statements were made. These women still went to church, still got baptised, still went on pilgrimage, and I am thinking about one particular woman name Aunt Vie, a very

strong woman, strong-willed and everything, they use to call her “man-royal” behind her back, but no one ever dare to meddle with her.

Things are different now in Jamaica. Now all you have to do is not respond to a man’s call to you and dem call you sodomite or lesbian. I guess it was different back then forty years ago because it was harder for anybody to really conceive of two women sleeping and being sexual. But I do remember when you were “suspect,” people would talk about you. You were definitely classed as “different,” “not normal,” a bit of a “crazy.” But women never really got stoned like the men.

What I remember is that if you were a single woman alone or two single women living together and a few people suspected this and when I say a few people I mean like a few guys, sometimes other crimes were committed against the women. Some very violent, some very subtle. Battery was common, especially in Kingston. A group of men would suspect a woman or have it out for her because she was a “sodomite” or because she act “man-royal” and so the men would organize and gang rape whichever woman was “suspect.” Sometimes it was reported in the newspapers, other times it wasn’t – but when you live in a little community, you don’t need a newspaper to tell what’s going on. You know by word of mouth and those stories were frequent. Sometimes you also knew the men who did the battery.

Other subtle forms of this was “scorning” the women. Meaning that you didn’t eat anything from them, especially a cooked meal. It was almost as if those accused of being “man! royal” or “sodomite” could contaminate.

A Conversation with My Grandmother

I am only telling you this so that you can understand that this is not a profession to be proud of and to get involved in. Everybody should be curious and I know you born with that, ever since you growing up as a child and I can’t fight against that, because that is how everybody get to know what’s in the world. I am only telling you this because when you were a teenager, you always say you want to experience everything and make up your mind on your own. You didn’t like people telling you what was wrong and right. That always use to scare me.

Experience is good, yes. But it have to be balanced, you have to know when you have too much experience in one area. I am telling you this because I think you have enough experience in this to decide now to go back to the normal way. You have two children. Do you want them to grow up knowing this is the life you have taken? But this is for you to decide . . .

Yes, there was a lot of women involved with women in Jamaica. I knew a lot of them when I was growing up in the country in the 1920s. I didn’t really associate with them. Mind you, I was not rude to them. My mother wouldn’t stand for any rudeness from any of her children to adults.

I remember a woman we use to call Miss Bibi. She lived next to us – her husband was a fisherman, I think he

drowned before I was born. She had a little wooden house that back onto the sea, the same as our house. She was quiet, always reading. That I remember about her because she use to go to the little public library at least four days out of the week. And she could talk. Anything you want to know, just ask Miss Bibi and she could tell you. She was mulatto woman, but poor. Anytime I had any school work that I didn't understand, I use to ask her. The one thing I remember though, we wasn't allowed in her house by my mother, so I use to talk to her outside, but she didn't seem to mind that. Some people use to think she was mad because she spent so much time alone. But I didn't think that because anything she help me with, I got a good mark on it in school.

She was colourful in her own way, but quiet, always alone, except when her friend come and visit her once a year for two weeks. Them times I didn't see Miss Bibi much because my mother told me I couldn't go and visit her. Sometimes I would see her in the market exchanging and bartering fresh fish for vegetables and fruits. I use to see her friend too. She was a jet Black woman, always had her hair tied in bright coloured cloth and she always had on big gold earrings. People use to say she lived on the other side of the island with her husband and children and she came to Port Maria once a year to visit Miss Bibi.

My mother and father were great storytellers and I learnt that from them, but is from Miss Bibi that I think I learnt to love reading so much as a child. It wasn't until I move to Kingston that I notice other women like Miss Bibi. . . .

Let me tell you about Jones. Do you remember her? Well she was the woman who lived the next yard over from us. She is the one who really turn me against people like that and why I fear so much for you to be involved in this ting. She was very loud. Very show-off. Always dressed in pants and man-shirt that she borrowed from her husband. Sometimes she use to invite me over to her house, but I didn't go. She always had her hair in a bob cut, always barefoot and tending to her garden and her fruit trees. She tried to get me involved in that kind of life, but I said no. At the time I remember I needed some money to borrow and she lent me, later she told me I didn't have to pay her back, but to come over to her house and see the thing she had that was sweeter than what any man could offer me. I told her no and eventually paid her back the money.

We still continued to talk. It was hard not to like Jonesie – that's what everybody called her. She was open and easy to talk to. But still there was a fear in me about her. To me it seem like she was in a dead end with nowhere to go. I don't want that for you.

I left my grandmother's house that day feeling anger and sadness for Miss Jones – maybe for myself, who knows. I was feeling boxed in. I had said nothing. I'd only listened quietly.

In bed that night, I thought about Miss Jones. I cried for her (for me) silently. I remembered her, a mannish looking Indian woman, with flashy gold teeth, a Craven A cigarette always between them. She was always nice to me as a child.

She had the sweetest, juiciest Julie, Bombay, and East Indian mangoes on the street. She always gave me mangoes over the fence. I remember the dogs in her yard and the sign on her gate. "Beware of bad dogs." I never went into her house, though I was always curious.

I vaguely remember her pants and shirts, though I never thought anything of them until my grandmother pointed them out. Neither did I recall that dreaded word being used to describe her, although everyone on the street knew about her.

A Conversation with My Mother

Yes, I remember Miss Jones. She smoke a lot, drank a lot. In fact, she was an alcoholic. When I was in my teens she use to come over to our house – always on the verandah. I can't remember her sitting down – seems she was always standing up, smoking, drinking, and reminiscing. She constantly talked about the past, about her life. And it was always women: young women she knew when she was a young woman, the fun they had together and how good she could make love to a woman. She would say to whoever was listening on the verandah, "Dem girls I use to have sex with was shapely. You shoulda know me when I was younger, pretty, and shapely just like the 'oman dem I use to have as my 'oman."

People use to tease her on the street, but not about being a lesbian or calling her sodomite. People use to tease her when she was drunk, because she would leave the rumshop and stagger down the avenue to her house.

I remember the women she use to carry home, usually in the daytime. A lot of women from downtown, higglers and fishwomen. She use to boast about knowing all kinds of women from Coronation market and her familiarity with them. She had a husband who lived with her and that served her as her greatest protection against other men taking steps with her. Not that anybody could easily take advantage of Miss Jones, she could stand up for herself. But having a husband did help. He was a very quiet, insular man. He didn't talk to anyone in the street. He had no friends so it wasn't easy for anyone to come up to him and gossip about his wife.

No one could go to her house without being invited, but I wouldn't say she was a private person. She was a loner. She went to the rumshops alone, she drank alone, she staggered home alone. The only times I ever saw her with somebody were the times when she went off to the Coronation market or some other place downtown to find a woman and bring her home. The only times I remember her engaging in conversation with anybody was when she came over on the verandah to talk about her women and what they did in bed. That was all she let out about herself. There was nothing about how she was feeling, whether she was sad or depressed, lonely, happy. Nothing. She seemed to cover up all of that with her loudness and her vulgarness and her constant threat – which was all it was – to beat up anybody who troubled her or teased her when she was coming home from the rumshop.

Now Cherry Rose – do you remember her? She was a good friend of Aunt Marie and of Mama’s. She was also a sodomite. She was loud too, but different from Miss Jones. She was much more outgoing. She was a barmaid and had lots of friends – both men and women. She also had the kind of personality that attracted people – very vivacious, always laughing, talking and touching. She didn’t have any children, but Gem did.

Do you remember Miss Gem? Well she had children and she was also a barmaid. She also had lots of friends. She also had a man friend name Mickey, but that didn’t matter because some women had their men and still had women they carried on with. The men usually didn’t know what was going on, and seeing as these men just come and go and usually on their own time, they weren’t around every day and night.

Miss Pearl was another one that was in that kind of thing. She was a dressmaker, she use to sew really good. Where Gem was light complexion, she was a very black Black woman with deep dimples. Where Gem was a bit plump, Pearl was slim, but with big breasts and a big bottom. They were both pretty women.

I don’t remember hearing that word sodomite a lot about them. It was whispered sometimes behind their backs, but never in front of them. And they were so alive and talkative that people were always around them.

The one woman I almost forgot was Miss Opal, a very quiet woman. She use to be friends with Miss Olive and was always out of her bar sitting down. I can’t remember much about her except she didn’t drink like Miss Jones and she wasn’t vulgar. She was soft spoken, a half-Chinese woman. Her mother was born in Hong Kong and her father was a Black man. She could really bake. She use to supply shops with cakes and other pastries.

So there were many of those kind of women around. But it wasn’t broadcast.

I remembered them. Not as lesbians or sodomites or man royals, but as women that I liked. Women whom I admired. Strong women, some colourful, some quiet.

I loved Cherry Rose’s style. I loved her loudness, the way she challenged men in arguments, the bold way she laughed in their faces, the jingle of her gold bracelets. Her colourful and stylish way of dressing. She was full of wit; words came alive in her mouth.

Miss Gem: I remember her big double iron bed. That was where Paula and Lorraine (her daughters, my own age) and I spent a whole week together when we had chicken pox. My grandmother took me there to stay for the company. It was fun. Miss Gem lived right above her bar and so at any time we could look through the window and onto the piazza and street which was bursting with energy and life. She was a very warm woman, patient and caring. Every day she would make soup for us and tell us stories. Later on in the evening she would bring us Kola champagne.

Miss Pearl sewed dresses for me. She hardly ever used her

tape measure – she could just take one look at you and make you a dress fit for a queen. What is she doing now, I asked myself! And Miss Opal, with her calm and quiet, where is she – still baking?

What stories could these lesbians have told us! I, an Afro-Caribbean woman living in Canada, come with this baggage – their silenced stories. My grandmother and mother know the truth, but silence still surrounds us. The truth remains a secret to the rest of the family and friends, and I must decide whether to continue to sew this cloth of denial or break free, creating and becoming the artist that I am, bringing alive the voices and images of Cherry Rose, Miss Gem, Miss Jones, Opal, Pearl, and others.

* * *

There is more at risk for us than for white women. Through three hundred years of history we have carried memories and the scars of racism and violence with us. We are the sisters, daughters, mothers of a people enslaved by colonialists and imperialists.

Under slavery, production and reproduction were inextricably linked. Reproduction served not only to increase the labour force of slave owners but also, by “domesticating” the enslaved, facilitated the process of social control. Simultaneously, the enslaved responded to dehumanizing conditions by focusing on those aspects of life in which they could express their own desires. Sex was an area in which to articulate one’s humanity but, because it was tied to attempts “to define oneself as human,” gender roles, as well as the act of sex, became badges of status. To be male was to be the stud, the procreator; to be female was to be fecund, and one’s femininity was measured by the ability to attract and hold a man, and to bear children. In this way, slavery and the post-emancipated colonial order defined the structures of patriarchy and heterosexuality as necessary for social mobility and acceptance.

Socioeconomic conditions and the quest for a better life have seen steady migration from Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean to the United States, Britain and Canada. Upon my arrival, I became part of the so – called “visible minorities” encompassing Blacks, Asians, and Native North Americans in Canada. I live with a legacy of continued racism and prejudice. We confront this daily, both as individuals and as organized political groups. Yet for those of us who are lesbians, there is another struggle: the struggle for acceptance and positive self-definition within our own communities. Too often, we have had to sacrifice our love for women in political meetings that have been dominated by the “we are the world” attitude of heterosexual ideology. We have had to hide too often that part of our identity which contributes profoundly to make up the whole.

Many lesbians have worked, like me, in the struggles of Black people since the 1960s. We have been on marches every time one of us gets murdered by the police. We have been at sit-ins and vigils. We have flyered, postered, we have cooked

and baked for the struggle. We have tended to the youths. And we have all at one time or another given support to men in our community, all the time painfully holding onto, obscuring, our secret lives. When we do walk out of the closet (or are thrown out), the “ideologues” of the Black communities say “Yes, she was a radical sistren but, I don’t know what happen, she just went the wrong way.” What is implicit in this is that one cannot be a lesbian and continue to do political work and, not surprisingly, it follows that a Black lesbian / artist cannot create using the art forms of our culture. For example, when a heterosexual male friend came to my house, I put on a dub poetry taper He asked, “Are you sure that sistren is a lesbian?”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because this poem sound wicked, it have lots of rhythm; it sounds cultural.”

Another time, another man commented on my work, “That book you wrote on domestic workers is really a fine piece of work. I didn’t know you were that informed about the economic politics of the Caribbean and Canada.” What are we to assume from this? That Afro-Caribbean lesbians have no Caribbean culture? That they lose their community politics when they sleep with women? Or that Afro-Caribbean culture is a heterosexual commodity?

The presence of an “out” Afro-Caribbean lesbian in our community is dealt with by suspicion and fear from both men and our heterosexual Black sisters. It brings into question the assumption of heterosexuality as the only “normal” way. It forces them to acknowledge something that has always been covered up. It forces them to look at women differently and brings into question the traditional Black female role. Negative response from our heterosexual Black sisters, though more painful, is, to a certain extent, understandable because we have no race privilege and very, very few of us have class privilege. The one privilege within our group is heterosexual. We have all suffered at the hands of this racist system at one time or another and to many heterosexual Black women it is income ceivable, almost frightening, that one could turn her back on credibility in our community and the society at large by being lesbian. These women are also afraid that they will be labelled “lesbian” by association. It is that fear, that homophobia, which keeps Black women isolated.

The Toronto Black community has not dealt with sexism. It has not been pushed to do so. Neither has it given a thought to its heterosexism. In 1988, my grandmother’s fear is very real, very alive. One takes a chance when one writes about being an Afro-Caribbean lesbian. There is the fear that one might not live to write more. There is the danger of being physically “disciplined” for speaking as a woman-identified woman.

And what of our white lesbian sisters and their community! They have learnt well from the civil rights movement about organizing, and with race and some class privilege, they have built a predominantly white lesbian (and gay)

movement – a precondition for a significant body of work by a writer or artist. They have demanded and received recognition from politicians (no matter how little). But this recognition has not been extended to Third World lesbians of colour – neither from politicians nor from white lesbian (and gay) organizations. The white lesbian organizations / groups have barely (some not at all) begun to deal with or acknowledge their own racism, prejudice, and biases – all learned from a system that feeds on their ignorance and grows stronger from its institutionalized racism. Too often white women focus only on their oppression as lesbians, ignoring the more complex oppression of non-white women who are also lesbians. We remain outsiders in these groups, without images or political voices that echo our own. We know too clearly that, as non – white lesbians in this country, we are politically and socially at the very bottom of the heap. Denial of such differences robs us of true Visibility. We must identify and define these differences, and challenge the movements and groups that are not accessible to non whites – challenge groups that are not accountable.

But where does this leave us as Afro-Caribbean lesbians, as part of this “visible minority” community? As Afro-Caribbean women we are still at the stage where we have to imagine and discover our existence, past and present. As lesbians, we are even more marginalized, less visible. The absence of a national Black lesbian and gay movement through which to begin to name ourselves is disheartening. We have no political organization to support us and through which we could demand respect from our communities. We need such an organization to represent our interests, both in coalition-building with other lesbian / gay organizations, and in the struggles that shape our future A through which we hope to transform the social, political, and economic systems of oppression as they affect all peoples.

Though not yet on a large scale, lesbians and gays of Caribbean descent are beginning to seek each other out – are slowly organizing. Younger lesbians and gays of colour are beginning to challenge and force their parents and the Black community to deal With their sex – uality. They have formed groups, “Zami for Black and Caribbean gays and lesbians” and “Lesbians of Colour,” to name two.

The need to make connections with other Caribbean and Third World people of colour who are lesbian and gay is urgent. This is where we can begin to build that other half of our community, to create wholeness through our art. This is where we will find the support and strength to struggle, to share our histories and to record these histories in books, documentaries, film, sound, and art. We will create a rhythm that is uniquely ours – proud, powerful, and gay. Being invisible is no longer. Naming ourselves and taking our space within the larger history of Afro-Caribbean peoples is a dream to be realized, a dream to act upon. 