



Tonia Bryan, "Too Black Dykes," oil pastel on paper, 1.5' x 2', 1994.

Photo: Shannon Greene

Confessions of a Whip-Cracking Dominatrix

by Candis Graham

En examinant l'image de la lesbienne dans la pornographie masculine, l'auteure qui est écrivaine se demande si tous les

This whip-cracking-dominatrix thing sounds like male pornography to me. I don't own a whip, don't own a bustier, and I never ever wear high heels.

journalistes hétérosexuels ne voient les lesbiennes que comme des objets sexuels.

The egocentrism and ignorance of straight people in power is beyond belief. They are so ignorant. They know nothing about gay life—nothing. They don't understand what we live with every day.

Sarah Schulman¹

Many many things are changing in the world, as we approach the twenty-first century. Maybe that's why I thought straight people had changed. I thought they had finally figured out that we are just like them. We breathe. We bleed. The only real differences are minor: dykes tend to wear comfortable shoes; we call our partners our lovers; and, we form enduring friendships with each other.

Or are dykes different? Because I love a woman, because I spend most of my time with women, because these women call themselves lesbians, does that make me entirely different from straights?

That's how two journalists treated me. Like a Lesbian.

In April 1993 my second book was published.² I was excited. Excited? I was in a state of nearly-constant bliss. That summer, when there was going to be a review in the local newspaper and then someone phoned to schedule an interview for CBC radio, I thought, wow, I've made it. This is the big time. It doesn't get any bigger or better than this.

Ha!

The review was written by the book editor of *The Ottawa Citizen*.³ It covered three columns, but all I could see were the words in the second last paragraph. I wanted to throw my head back and laugh and laugh. I wanted to bury my face in my hands and weep. I wanted to stomp around the house, cursing and swearing at the top of my lungs.

In the following days, as I read and reread the review, I decided he meant to be kind.

The headline is, "Valley Values Important in Feminist Writer's Stories." That's kind.

He wrote, "Her characters—mothers, daughters, lovers—have their conflicts and problems, but end up extolling kindness, self-esteem, nature and love ... but Graham quells yawns by grittily exploring women's issues and lesbian relationships ... these themes are, in turn, softened and balanced by Graham's gentle, humane attitude." That's kind.

But in the second last paragraph, he said,

... so much for the images of bull walruses or whip-cracking dominatrices on stiletto heels wearing black masks and bustiers that the word (dyke) conjures up for some straight readers.

What? This whip-cracking-dominatrix thing sounds like male pornography to me. I don't own a whip, don't own a bustier, and I never ever wear high heels. Bull walrus? Surely he means bull dagger? Or maybe he means diesel dyke? He didn't even get the stereotype right.

During the radio interview, I realized we were touching on sadly similar themes. I think she meant to be kind, too. But.

We sat in an empty restaurant in the Chateau Laurier and drank coffee. The tape recorder was on the table, between us. She was warm and friendly, and worked at making me feel comfortable. She said she had read both my books, which amazed me.

She started the taped interview with some very kind words. "Candis Graham writes in a style very similar to Anne Tyler or Isabel Huggan. Life is explored through its smallest detail. A story might be no more than just a scene, and a lot of her work explores relationships between parent and child, between friends, between lovers."

She went on to say, "You haven't ever hidden the fact that you are a lesbian. Were you afraid that you would be ghettoized because of that? That straight people would pick it up and when they saw, let's see, in your little biographical blurb here, 'gossip and lesbian tea parties are two of her passions.' Oh, well, Candis Graham is a lesbian. I'm not going to read her. Were you afraid of that reaction?"

My mind sputtered, but, but ... what can I say? I longed to reply, "There are, of course, all those who will say, 'Oh, well, Candis Graham is a lesbian. I'm certainly going to read her!'" That would sound flippant and maybe even rather bold. I was not feeling bold. I wished to be diplomatic. I yearned to sound articulate and wise and witty.

This was, after all, the big time.

I opened my mouth and let the words out. "It was a conscious decision to put the word lesbian on the back cover of this book, to make sure that it was there. But I think there is a ghetto. For the longest time about the only

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place I could be sure of getting writing about lesbians would be in a woman's bookstore in the lesbian section. The other bookstores might have one or two, if I searched through all the shelves. I'd have to search to find them and they'd be very hidden. So I think there is a ghetto. And if I stand and look at the shelves of the lesbian section of say The Ottawa Women's Bookstore, most of those publishers are American lesbian or American feminist lesbian publishers. So there really is a ghetto. I feel that's been changing, but that's the reality."

I breathed an invisible sigh of relief. There, that didn't sound half bad. And now we could move on to something else.

But she was persistent. "But this is interesting because it makes me think about how we used to separate Canadian writers in bookstores and in the library. You know, here are the Canadian writers and then here are the rest of them. And then it was like, well no, these are writers. Whether they're Canadian, whether they're lesbian, whether they're Black. These are writers. Would you not want to be part of the writers? Or do you want to be known as a lesbian writer?"

Do I have a choice? Everyone, lesbian or straight, puts that label on me, large and permanent and forever: Candis Graham is a Lesbian Writer. What shall I say? Oh, dear. I wished I was fast on my feet. But I am slow, painfully slow. I would likely think of a brilliant response tomorrow or maybe the day after.

"I would like very much for lesbians to know I'm writing these stories. But I would like to be available, I'd like my writing to be available generally. The exciting thing about this book is the publisher is not a lesbian publisher. And so I'm walking into bookstores I've walked into for years and seeing my book on the shelves. That's very exciting. I don't have any feedback. I don't know if

they're reordering in huge supplies or it's selling slowly. I don't know yet, what's happening. But that's part of the change, yes."

Still, she was not finished. "I think that a lot of people have misconceptions about the lesbian lifestyle. They think of lesbians as a bunch of butch women in Doc Martens who, because they're lesbian, are somehow obsessed with their sex lives.⁴ And what I like about your writing is the women that you are writing about, some of them are obviously lesbian, some of the stories are written from a lesbian point of view, but the women in your stories are worried about raising their children, they're worried about their jobs, they're worried about getting back in touch with themselves creatively, they're worried about paying the mortgage. The same sort of stuff that the rest of us are. (The italics are mine.) You say that you think of your writing as political. Is part of the politics trying to hold up your experience to people to say, look I'm not that different from you?"

I wonder if that is what she is thinking? This woman sitting across from me is a lesbian and therefore she is obsessed with sex. Every woman Candis sees, she wants. She wants to have sex all day and all night, with anyone and everyone.

I was tempted to say to her, and to any one in the Ottawa Valley who had tuned into this CBC program, "But, you see, I am a dyke, even if I don't wear Doc Martens, even if I do not appear to be very butch. I am not straight and, therefore, I guess I am different from you. At least, you seem to think I am."

I don't think I like being in the big time. The ghetto, my lesbian community, may be small and limiting but it is also safe and friendly.

I swallowed twice, quickly, and tried to answer her truthfully and tactfully. "It has never occurred to me that I'm doing that. That someone could read the book and say, oh, gee, she isn't that different from me. I'd have to think about that. I'm certainly not consciously saying to myself, I'm going to write this story in this way so that non-lesbians will read it and, oh, hum, okay."

Do I imagine it, or does the tone of her voice become sharp. "Would you be happy if they did? Or doesn't it make any difference to you at all?"

I hastened to reassure her. I am a well-brought-up girl, regardless of my urge to rebel, regardless of my desire to say something outrageous. "No, no, it does make a difference. I think you're right. There are a lot of, there can be a lot of misconceptions about what it's like to be lesbian, what lesbians are like. I think a lot of it comes from porn. Years ago, when I first walked into a porn shop ... have you ever been in a porn shop?"

Oh, no! What have I done? I shouldn't be asking her a question. She's the interviewer. Don't I understand how this works? She asks the questions and I answer.

But she didn't seem to mind. She answered honestly. "In Toronto. You know, the Love Shop and that sort of thing."

There! She hasn't seen the real stuff, the hard stuff. That's because she is a woman. It's different for men. In this whole country is there one male over the age of sixteen who has not been in a real porn shop? Or, at the very least, who hasn't thumbed through a porn magazine or two?

"Oh, yes. The sort of polite places. (I mean) The real porn shops where only the men go. Well, I went in once. To have a look. I was shocked among other things about how often women together, or two women with a man, are themes and I thought, this explains a lot to me about how people view lesbians generally. A lot of it, I think, comes from porn. Which is a horrible thought. But I think anything that opens us up to each other, I would support. I think we have to be a lot more caring with each other. And more understanding."

Is that what she wanted me to say? That I care about straight people? How could I not? My mother was straight and so was my father. Both my sisters are straight, my nephew and two nieces, all my aunts and uncles and every first cousin as far as I can tell. My boss is straight, and so is the woman I share an office with.

Finally, at long last, she changed the subject. "You're writing a novel now, which you expect to be out when?"

I left the interview, feeling rather like a specimen who has squirmed and squealed while being dissected into small bits under a high-powered microscope.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that both journalists chose to focus on the same story out of a collection of eleven. "Elle-même With Waves" is the only story that has sex in it. Are they interested in this one because of their lesbian = sex obsession?

In the review, he wrote, "The *only* eroticism is a parking lot attendant's afternoon fantasies about self-stimulation,

which she brings to orgasm in her evening bath." (Again, the italics are mine.)

On the radio, she said, "One of the stories that I found was a bit of a surprise in this collection, just because it's like menstruation, something that you don't often read about, was the story "Elle-même With Waves" which is unabashedly erotic. And a very different eroticism than a lot of eroticism which is out there, which has been written by men."

I like her description of the story better than his. But, still. Am I the first (out) lesbian they have encountered in their varied and rich lives? Has their only experience with lesbians been in male porn magazines and porn movies? What else are they conjuring up? What other male porn images are they imposing on me, simply because I use the label lesbian? Have they confused me with pedophiles? Do they imagine me lusting after every small female child I see?

Last spring Jane Rule testified before the Supreme Court of British Columbia.⁵ She said, "I bitterly resent the implication that because I happen to be a lesbian, the assumption is that there must be something pornographic about my books. We are a community speaking with our passion about our lives in a homophobic world."

The article, written by Karen X. Tulchinsky, reports, "There was silence in the courtroom for a moment" (27).

Jane Rule testified because the owners of Little Sister's Bookstore were suing the government in response to repeated harassment.⁶ Employees of Canada Customs keep seizing books and magazines that they, the employees, deem to be obscene. This has been going on for years. From all appearances, the decisions of these civil servants seem to be based on discrimination and censorship. Consider this: mainstream bookstores don't have any trouble getting the very same books.

The court case between the Canadian government and Little Sister's makes me sad and angry, frightened and apprehensive. How can my government do this to me?

My government?



Candis Graham with Butch, Wendy's Dalmatian. Summer 1994.
Photo: Wendy Clouthier

Perhaps the Honourable Members of Parliament and their civil servants should put aside their magazines of whip-cracking dominatrixes wearing black masks and bustiers. Surely it is time for them to do some serious reading and thinking. Surely it is time for them to start talking about issues such as censorship and pornography and violence against women.

And, while they're at it, maybe it's time for them to educate themselves about lesbians.

Candis Graham has been writing about all sorts of lesbian things since 1976. She is 47, white, mostly Celtic, and working class but brought up to think of herself as middle class.

¹This quote appeared in *Deneuve*, March/April 1995.

²*Imperfect Moments*, Polestar Press, Vancouver, 1993.

³It appeared in the book section of the Saturday paper on August 14, 1993.

⁴I was wearing black Birkenstocks that day. In November 1995 I bought myself a pair of brown Doc Martens boots. If I ever do another CBC interview, I will wear my butch boots—even if it is the worst heat of July. Well, maybe not in the humid July heat.

⁵The case received remarkably little coverage in the media. This information appeared in the March/April 1995 issue of the American lesbian magazine *Deneuve*.

⁶Little Sister's is a gay and lesbian bookstore in Vancouver.

References

Tulchinsky, Karen X. "Banned in Canada." *Deneuve* (March/April 1995): 27.

BETSY WARLAND

o thou undaunted daughter of desire

in the doorway your hands, mouth
 windows open to first summer wind
 wanton through your house, butterfly-
 amber-purple-bluegreen tunic made
 half a world away wind
 through you worry if it will
 i slip it on suddenly shy, silken
 breasts wanting your hands, wind
 o-o-o's current of your
 mouth, house floating on you open
 my cocoon, tonguing its larva silken in
 your
 tendril hair haloing trembling
 thighs, door frame holding, wind
 lifting moan wings beating in your
 infinite mouth

Betsy Warland is currently working on Bloodroot—A mother's death, a contemplative prose manuscript. Afterlife of the Heart, her most recent collection of poems (which investigate various forms of longing) is presently being considered by a publisher. She lives in Saskatoon.

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