

# Uncontrollably and Incurably Yours

by Tonia Bryan

*L'auteure jette un regard sur le racisme qui existe à l'intérieur des communautés lesbiennes et des communautés de femmes.*

*Keeping secrets is not an option. I can't hide away my words. They represent my resistance. My persistently stubborn need to read the world according to my own systems of value. The risk is all my own.*

Lesbians and Politics. Seeing these two words juxtaposed on a flyer calling for submissions to an issue of *Canadian Woman Studies*, almost as if they're synonymous, forces me to reflect on many questions I've asked myself. Who decides what a lesbian is? When an individual's definition of lesbian conflicts with those dominant in lesbian communities, whose vision gets priority? What happens to those wimmin whose lesbianNESS is problematic *not only* in the outside world but also within lesbian circles? Whose political agendas do I pursue and why? Then I feel that familiar tightness in my chest as I remember the many times that I could not, or would not live my politics twenty four hour-a-day, everyday. Tears threaten to flow.

I'm coming at this discussion from my own point of view—that of a Diasporic African woman in therapy. A Black woman in **THE LIFE** whose trying to survive and work in and around Black and brown communities of lesbians. So when I talk about communities and lezzies this is where my head's at. I am also speaking as a dyke who came out to all of herSELF in Ottawa, between a woman's thighs, tongue pressed on her clit, swimming in her flow. Much, much later, I began to realize what that meant and I worked to find out more.

Passing up the het thang, I also gave up many things about my past way of life. But I was excited. I felt as if I was moving on to something filled to the brim with potential. Finally, I would be able to explore MySELF. Looking inside, I would rock my WORLD, stretching, expanding the limits of what was possible in my life.

I read everything by Audre Lorde. She was my goddess incarnate. The mother of my Black lesbian consciousness. Through her, I discovered that YES, it was possible to be Black and lesbian and a feminist, all at the same time. She taught me to challenge the white people on their shit and I did. She showed me how to love my Diasporic African,

lesbian SELF and how to channel that energy into a creative force that would free me from colonization and show me to a truer understanding of the world around me.

I moved on and moved to Toronto, consuming more work by wimmin warriors. Often their words stood in stark contrast to Audre's. Sometimes their values challenged and changed my own. But I feel that the spirit of Audre's work has always stayed with me as I have grown.

Gonna stand firm now, Audre style. I am going beyond what is allowed again, as I often do. I am going to a place where there is no safety. From this spot I'm going to shout out *loud*. This is a place of aloneness. Long nights crying and questioning, days spent with the fist of tension crammed tight in my gut have propelled me here.

Keeping secrets is not an option. I can't hide away my words. They represent my resistance, my ability to generate my own thoughts and ideas. My persistently stubborn need to read the world according to my own systems of value. The risk is all my own. What more can happen? I was never IN; so the politicians can't cast me OUT (as they have done with others). They've never put food in my mouth; so they can't dictate what emerges from it (as they have done to others). There will be no loss of potential prestige or ostracism from the inner sanctum of feminist activism; once a common class impostor, always a common class impostor. **I KNOW WHO I AM.**

Even though I've got that longed-for degree—paid for with government grants and scholarships and a way of talking that supposedly marks me as an honorary member of the middle class, the political lesbian sisterhood spotted me, an outsider. Once they realized that my family is not old or new money, hidden like so many of the skeletons in the backs of their own closets, they read me. Once they saw that I had emotions, once they heard me cuss, once they saw my mouth open wide at their polite political feminist meetings. Once they saw that I had cleavage and a hankering for tight, loud-coloured clothes and blatant, rude sex talk, it didn't matter that I was Black, feminist, *and* a lesbian.

But I've got their number too. I understand that to many of my sisters, my lesbianism ain't *real* lesbianism. And my interests? My interests don't even *count* as being political (read: suitable activities for a lesbian feminist). I often watch them ram their brand of **THE POLITICAL** down other wimmin's throats. Preaching about class and **MARXISM** from their big houses and condos, living off their fat paycheques or steady grant money, coming straight out of education in posh private schools, taking time off every now and again to travel or do feminist missionary outreach in some poor third world backwater and I *SEE* them.

How can I describe the threat I face every time I dare to

open my mouth? The times they have reminded me and others that working class and poor women are S-I-L-E-N-C-E-D ... *silenced*. They get that look—a combination of pity and superiority—as they sigh and explain to me for the umpteenth time how *THESE* wimmin don't really know about wimmin's issues, that they are living in ignorance, unable to speak.

"YOU," their eyes tell me, "did not grow up poor. If you did, you would be cowering and following our every word as if it were law. You would NOT be able to question our activities or the links we don't wish to make." Deep down they know what to do. True at last to the legacies of the families, present realities, and privileges they try so hard to deny, they turn to me and say: "YOU are a worker. Don't aspire to do anything else. We are the trust fund babies, born leaders, high school debating champs, future community leaders, and lesbians-in-control of the situation.



Tonia Bryan, "Seated Self Portrait," oil pastel on butcher paper, 4' tall, 1993.  
Photo: Shannon Greene

Soooo *SISTA*—STOP acting like you know anything. Just play like a sheep and follow obediently."

Heads are gonna roll. Know why this mouth works so damn well? Why I open this gaping, threatening Black mouth and scare you with my uncouth, forward, supposedly apolitical ways? Chile, if I was raised UP to be Goldilocks, Rapunzel, or one of their darker, less-well-known prissy sisters, I would not *NEED* to open my mouth. I would just have to sigh or voice a few carefully chosen words and the object of my desire, *whatever* I craved would just materialize. In truth, silence for me has always meant no one to give me a second glance, let *alone* consider my needs. So I learned. Learned that my open mouth was a threat. Learned to open it and voice my concerns. Learned that to not do so would be the death of me. And I'm not ready to go yet.

Even if y'all refuse to A-N-A-L-Y-Z-E the way you USE that tired story about poor and lower-class wimmin ALL being silent and unaware of their own issues, I'm goin' there. I may have been silenced in school where as a Black, immigrant child I pissed my pants rather than attract attention by asking to go to the washroom. I may have endured quietly as my young eyes looked into an empty fridge for food we had no money to buy. May have been silenced when my sister and I were picked up by the police as we were walking in a white, middle-class neighbourhood collecting money for Jerry's fucking kids. As a depressed teen sitting home alone in the dark, wondering if HYDRO would ignore the unpaid bills and turn our lights back on, I had no voice. White male doctors could undress my pubescent body, measuring the exaggerated curvature of my spine, and living out their psychotic hottentot venus delusions without a sound from me, 'cuz I was silenced. Still could not speak out at fifteen, could not cuss out my first lover, a twenty-two year old man who gave me an STD. I was silenced but not frozen when in my teens I ran away from home repeatedly because my father did not understand me or my need for a say in my own life. I may have BEEN silenced *THEN*, but no more. What? You didn't hear me? I said *NO MORE!*

Never, in my wildest dreams did I expect to find mySELF, my dreams and my desires gagged, bound, and subjugated by any wimmin's community. But I was such a *goood* girl. I read all the proper political feminist bibles of acceptable thought. When their words said that there would be no fear here and that I would be loved and accepted as a whole? I believed. Like a fool I believed the fine, published, carefully crafted words.

But I know I'm not the only one. We've been finding each other. Been readin' between the lines. And living there too. Whispering the truth to each other when no one

else would listen. Crying tears of frustration and grief. Sharing our thoughts, hopes, and dreams. Comforting those too broken to fight. Communicating defiantly. And boldly living our own versions of lesbian life.

I've been questioning the myth of the politically and morally superior lesbian feminist community. What makes us think that just 'cuz we have pussies not cocks, just 'cuz some of us might lick it not penetrate it, just 'cuz we have collective meetings not corporate coups, just 'cuz some of us locks our hair not fry it, that we're fundamentally different than the people in the rest of the world? I got

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*NEWS* for you. We ALL grew up and were socialized in the same sadistic, power-hungry, murderous, oppressive climate as everyone else and as far as I can see, we've built our communities on the same rocky, poisonous soil.

This is dangerous talk of course. In my mind's eye I have visions of being labelled negative, antifeminist, or disrespectful of the work done by the Black and brown lesbians who have come before me. But it is precisely because I *have* respected and believed in their words that I am able to come OUT with the things I'm saying. I know there's something wrong when there's no room in "political" lesbian feminist circles for wimmin who speak their mind. Our hopes and dreams are threatened when sistas can't critique US and how we're livin' rather than always sacrificing our energies to the conservative, straight, white, *Right*. Things are critical when outlaw explorers are denied access to lesbian spaces/wimmin's land because their very existence undermines myths of homogenous lesbian communities. As I write, the spirits and lives of many are being destroyed in the name of the lesbian feminist status quo.

Do I fear for myself? Of course, who wouldn't? In this time of economic depression, continued societal repression, and increased government attacks on already oppressed communities, my words are risky. Speaking the truth might be taken as a divisive act that could leave us open to further racist, misogynist, lesbophobic, classist abuse. But aren't we actually *aiding* in the destruction of our *own* communities when truths go unspoken and unexamined?

Having said this I'm askin' lesbians who regularly make it their business to limit the options of their sisters by labelling anything they don't understand or haven't experienced as not really political, oppressive, or misogynist ... what do you mean there's only one way to be Black? One

way to be politically active? One way to dialogue? One way for a real dyke to dress? One way for her to do her hair? Certain ways to fuck? *ONE WAY TO BE A LESBIAN*? And it's YOUR way? I didn't know there was a Miss Manners book of lesbian politics.

Well in that case I'm writing a *NEW* rule book and it's personal—that means it's just for me. In it I'm gonna schedule time for a break. I *REALLY* need a break. On the front cover I'm gonna draw a picture of some safe, flexible yet strong armour so I can protect myself, deflecting the accusations of finger pointing middle and upper class (identified) lesbians who use feminist process to attack or withhold support when their inherited, socialized power and assumptions are questioned. I'm charting a detailed map that I can refer to when they try to lead me down the garden path of conservatism and intolerance. And there's gonna be a pop-up section where I keep my loud speaker for those times when I choose to face them and talk B(L)ACK. Oh, and I'll have my Harry Houdini One Thousand and One Great Escapes manual just in case I should *yet again* find myself struggling in the grip of "community" power play manoeuvrings with enough mudslinging and back stabbing to make any right-wing politician proud.

Can't we cut the crap and dispense with the dishonesty about lesbian feminist communities being safe places where we throw away conventional manners and finally speak the truth about every part of our lives? I thought we would be making a brave new world, not giving new names to old LIES. What's new about feminist Big Sister collective meetings run by white men's debating club rules of conduct? What's radical about plenaries, conferences, and closed meetings where only a few can afford registration fees, fewer are invited, and where only a small privileged minority actually understand what's going on? What's political about gatherings, meetings, and dances where the unspoken tension around our desires, differences, and disagreements is *so thick* you could slice it and serve it for dinner?

The answers to the questions are many and will definitely vary according to your perspective; so I can't and won't answer *FOR* you. And even if I did would it make a difference? Our brick-for-brick pint-sized replicas of the REAL world need to transform. Encompassing the defiant realities and goals of many sistas not just a chosen few. Stretch or die. Stretch or become what we most despise. The opportunities to create something healthy and sane are infinite. With hope I look forward to the time when we will all rise out of our own ashes focused, refreshed, and *RENEWED*.

*Tonia Bryan is a Black lesbian feminist who wishes she could afford to become a hermit. She is a member of B.A.N.S.H.I.I., De Poonani Posse, a Black lesbian cultural production house, putting out a Black lesbian magazine called DA JUICE!, and is also a member of the new Fireweed collective. Presently, her hobbies are reading, writing porn, and masturbating.*

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