

Talking With Trailblazers: Engaging In a Dialogue With the Contributors' Notes Of the
Lesbian-Feminist Periodical *Sinister Wisdom*

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In 1980, Vera Williams was incarcerated for blocking a Pentagon entrance during the Women's Pentagon Action demonstration (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 326). Two thousand women marched on November 17 1980 and Vera was one of one hundred and forty that were arrested (Hanks Harwood, n.d.). This demonstration was done to protest and bring awareness to the USA's government's defense plans which the protestors argued would be detrimental to humankind (Hanks Harwood, n.d.). Vera was part of a historic demonstration. The Women's Pentagon Action is a monumental event in feminist peace activism and yet I did not know it occurred. I only know about it and Vera's involvement because she mentioned it in her "contributors' note" in an issue of the periodical *Sinister Wisdom*. The "contributors' notes" section of this lesbian art and literary periodical is where I found this information on Vera and learned about hundreds of other writers and artists that had work published in *Sinister Wisdom*.

The "contributors' notes" section of *Sinister Wisdom* is found towards the back of each issue and comprises two pages of a one hundred or more pages periodical. It contains intriguing and poignant insights into the periodical's contributors. One example of many is Vera's involvement in the Women's Pentagon Action. The "contributors' notes" section provides short, usually one sentence to a small paragraph, self-written tidbits, details, or facts regarding the identities and lives of the writers featured in that particular issue. It is a seemingly insignificant and nonessential two page portion of a substantial and meaningful periodical. It is easy to turn the page and miss the section entirely. Perhaps it is akin to the coffee offered after a six course meal in that some people may skip it entirely as they are too full and satisfied by the meal that came before it. However, I would argue that the "contributors' notes" section of *Sinister Wisdom* is a delicious, nourishing, and thought-provoking meal all on its own.

My capstone project focuses on the “contributors’ notes” section of *Sinister Wisdom* and the tastes and insights it can give us of the women who contributed to the periodical, their identities, their struggles, and the cultural moment in which they lived. First, I will provide an introduction to *Sinister Wisdom* and Adrienne Rich from whom I derived much contextual and analytical insight. I will then describe my project’s supporting theories, questions, and methods, before engaging with the “contributors’ notes” in my findings section. Given the abundance and richness of the insights the “contributors’ notes” gave me, my findings section is further subcategorized into the following segments: inherited identities, educational work, creative pursuits, challenging limitations, and women relationships.

Sinister Wisdom

Sinister Wisdom was created in 1976 and is still published today. It was originally published and printed in North Carolina where the creators lived. As the periodical was handed down between editors, it also changed publication locations until it reached California where it is still published today (Parsons, n.d.). *Sinister Wisdom* was created by Catherine Nicholson and Harriet Desmoines who felt isolated living in North Carolina and wanted to build connections with other lesbians and women who shared their ideals and ideas (Parsons, n.d.). Their goal was to explore the following questions: “how does a woman survive when she steps out from the death process of patriarchy?” and “how does she think without thinking ‘their thoughts’, dreaming ‘their dreams’, repeating ‘their’ patterns?” (SinisterWisdom.org, n.d.). These questions explored how women, particularly lesbians, would think and live outside the confines of the patriarchy, if the hands of men let go of the reins on their lives. *Sinister Wisdom* was developed to explore, dream, and imagine a lesbian-feminist future and establish a strong community of

feminists in the present. Each issue of *Sinister Wisdom*, some specifically themed and some not, contains poetry, essays, art, and short stories by women. Some of these women are well known such as Adrienne Rich and some of these women, indeed many of these women, were never heard from again. It is because of this that I find the “contributors’ notes” section to be not only interesting from a personal perspective, but insightful from a historical and theoretical perspective. This section of *Sinister Wisdom* provides us with a glimpse into the lives and identities of the feminists and lesbians of past generations. Who were these women? What made them decide to contribute to a lesbian political and art journal? If these women were “ordinary” women leading “ordinary” lives, what can their involvement with this periodical teach us about women, feminism, and the culture of the time?

Adrienne Rich

Adrienne Rich was an iconic feminist writer whose poetry and essays still resonate and inspire today. She is described as being a “major intellectual voice of her generation” (Gilbert, 2018, first para.). Her award-winning poetry and essays explored many pertinent topics such as patriarchy, politics, sexuality, embodiment, and radical feminism (Riley, 2016). These topics are highly relevant to my project, however, I did not immediately make the connection between *Sinister Wisdom* and Rich, despite her being its editor between 1981 and 1983, until my supervisor suggested I read Rich’s essay on lesbian relationships and heterosexuality (sinisterwisdom.org, n.d.). This essay, and several others, connected directly to the findings I wanted to highlight. Given the connection between Rich and *Sinister Wisdom*, I found the relationship between her works and the contributors of the periodical to be worthy of engagement. She was thought of as the voice of her generation so I thought it would be

interesting to create a dialogue between Rich's essays and the women for whom she supposedly represented.

Research Significance and Theory

My capstone project contributes to the field of feminist periodical studies, and feminist media and cultural studies as a whole, by examining a specific section of a second wave feminist periodical. Feminist periodical studies is a relatively new academic field. Jordan and Meagher (2018) state that "while the field has expanded tremendously in the last decade, there has been limited engagement with feminist periodicals published in the wake of the women's movement's second wave" (pg. 93). *Sinister Wisdom* and other feminist periodicals are an untapped resource of feminist thought and history. Through an in-depth exploration of one section of *Sinister Wisdom*, as opposed to a surface-level investigation of the entire periodical, greater insight and a deeper understanding can be reached of this one section and what it provides in terms of feminist ideology. Jordan and Meagher (2018) argue that studying periodicals is an important and vital endeavor as these documents produce both real and imagined communities, allow us to fully appreciate the history of feminism and the narratives of which it is composed, and expose the practicalities and political nature of running feminist publications. These three purposes are part of the proposed research and are such complex questions that to answer them using *Sinister Wisdom* as a whole would be a nearly impossible task. Instead, examining just the "contributors' notes" section creates an opportunity for a deep and meaningful analysis of these purposes. How do the "contributors' notes" produce community? How and what do they show us regarding the

history of feminist thought and activism? How did the writers and artists contribute to the production of a feminist periodical?

As previously discussed, the contributors of *Sinister Wisdom* were often not famous writers, feminists, or artists. It is this normalcy, this ordinariness that makes the “contributors’ notes” of particular interest to my research goal of getting to understand the lives and identities of all *Sinister Wisdom* contributors. They are glimpses into the everyday lives of past feminists. Jordan and Meagher (2018) argue that periodicals allow us to explore the narratives of feminism’s history and there is no better way to explore it than by examining the lives and identities of the unknown women who carried the movement forward. It is the ordinariness of these invisible historical feminists that make the “contributors’ notes” section of *Sinister Wisdom* not only worthy of examining, but worthy of excitement. We need to know these women and the nuances of their lives as they blazed a trail for future feminists and women as a whole. Perhaps even more than that, we need to appreciate these women. Vera Williams, as described in the introduction, should be acknowledged for her involvement with the Women’s Pentagon Action. The contributors are just a small fraction of the unsung heroes of feminism, but they are the fraction we have access to through the “contributors’ notes”. We should not ignore the privilege of this access.

In addition to being a study in the field of feminist periodical studies, the proposed research also contributes to and takes its theory from the field of autobiography studies. Smith and Watson (2010) state that “life writing, as act and text, seems transparently simple... yet it is intriguingly complex” (pg. 21). It is this complexity that is attempted to be appreciated and understood in the field of autobiography studies and in my own project. The “contributors’

notes” are essentially small-scale autobiographies. Each entry is written by the contributor with seemingly little guidance provided by the editors of *Sinister Wisdom* on what they should share about themselves. As Smith and Watson (2010) suggest, the core of all autobiographies is “self-representation” (pg. 249). This is also the core of the proposed research. How do these women represent themselves to *Sinister Wisdom*’s assumedly lesbian and feminist community? What words do these women deliberately chose to describe themselves? Another vital aspect of autobiographies and autobiography studies is agency (Smith & Watson, 2010). Smith and Watson (2010) state that autobiographies “are at once sites of agentic narration where people control the interpretation of their lives and stories, telling of individual destinies and expressions ‘true’ selves” (pg. 54). Autobiographies allow the writer to own their lives, to claim for themselves what they have done and what has been done to them. It is a declaration of power. How did the contributors of *Sinister Wisdom* use the “contributors’ notes” section as a space to explore their own agency? How did they express their true selves? Self-representation and agency, both essential components of autobiographies and autobiography studies, are also at the core of the proposed project.

Autobiography studies focuses not only on the content of autobiographies, but their functionality and purpose. Smith and Watson (2010) argue that autobiographies are a “social action” (pg. 18). *Sinister Wisdom*’s editors would not have included the “notes” section if it did not contribute in some way to their goal of creating a lesbian community and collective consciousness. Autobiographies, and by extension the “contributors’ notes”, are created to be shared. They are as social as they are personal and it is this meeting between the intimate and the public that gives autobiographies their profoundness. It creates an immediate and potentially

deep connection between writer and reader. This connection perhaps might have been the purpose of the notes section in *Sinister Wisdom*. Rich (1976) believed “increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours” (pg. 81). Writing self-autobiographies is one way in which women can share their experiences and begin to build a feminist ideology. In a time without the instantaneous and global communication social media has provided, periodicals like *Sinister Wisdom* and its “contributors’ notes” section were one of the few available means of communication between women.

Another core aspect of the theory of autobiography studies that is particularly relevant to my project is its recognition of the role and subjectivity of the reader. In autobiography studies, the reader is not a passive recipient of knowledge, but an active participant in truth building. Smith and Watson (2010) state that “autobiographical truth resides in the inter-subjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life” (pg. 16). The reader has just an active role as the writer. I am extracting meaning directly from the notes, but this meaning is being filtered through my own knowledge systems, expectations, and values. I can attempt to be as objective as possible, but true objectivity is neither possible nor, to some extent, desirable. Autobiography studies not only takes reader subjectivity into account, but values it. If the subjective autobiographer’s words are read by an objective eye, all connection is lost and what should be a passionate and intimate engagement between writer and reader becomes a clinical and detached analysis. I do not want to analyze the “contributors’ notes”, but to engage with them.

Research Questions

I stumbled upon *Sinister Wisdom* while conducting research for a different project. This serendipitous stumbling managed to both satiate and stoke my hunger for women's words, history, and thoughts. I devoured the pages of *Sinister Wisdom* and tried to absorb as much of its meaning and mythos as I could. The poetry delighted and the essays inspired. Finding and reading the "contributor's notes" was, to continue my metaphor, as close to complimenting the chef as I could ever get. Reading about the contributors was enthralling. Being given a picture of who these women were was a gift. Therefore, I then started to begin each issue by reading the "notes" section. This reading habit began because of one question and this one question is the basis of this entire project. Who are these women and what did they do in and with their lives? I wanted so badly to know.

More specifically, my guiding question throughout this project is as follows: what do the "contributors' notes" from sequential issues of *Sinister Wisdom* tell us about the lives, struggles, identities, and feminist ideas of the women who were published in the periodical? Smith and Watson (2010) argue that "the autobiographical might be read.. for what it does, not what it is" (pg. 19). What the "contributors' notes" section does is provide the *Sinister Wisdom* reader with an inside look into the women behind the writing, thus allowing a deeper and potentially more influential relationship to be formed, as opposed to what it is which is a collection of short self-written descriptions. The purpose of this project is to contemplate the contributors behind the notes, to figuratively put a face to the name, to recognize and appreciate the work and struggles of 1970s-1990s lesbian feminists. It is an examination of embodied personhood rather than linguistic composition. It is a personal conversation between myself, the autobiography

reader, and the contributors, or autobiographical writer. My intent is not to form a relationship with the words, but the women.

Research Methods

In order to fully explore and grasp the significance of the “contributors’ notes” section of *Sinister Wisdom*, I used both content analysis and discourse analysis for this project. Content analysis is a “quantitative research technique used to explore the message characteristics in any form of communication (usually descriptive and objective)” (Trimble & Treiberg, 2015, pg. 229). I used this method to scan for both similarities and differences among the “contributors’ notes”, to find commonalities and peculiarities among what the contributors chose to share about themselves. Content analysis was also used to quantify the usage of notable words, such as “queer” or “wimmin”. It was worth quantifying such word usage as to highlight any potential themes, recurrent descriptors these women chose, and any particular language that may not be commonly used (such as “wimmin”). The method of content analysis was also used to explore where the women were writing from. By noting and quantifying the naming of cities or countries from which the contributors are writing, a map of *Sinister Wisdom*’s influence and community can be created. In what other countries, besides the USA, was *Sinister Wisdom* read? How geographically widespread was its community of contributors? A content analysis of “contributors’ notes” provided many insights into *Sinister Wisdom*’s contributors, the periodical as a whole, and feminism of the time.

This project also included discourse analysis. Trimble and Treiberg (2015) describe this textual analysis method as a “qualitative approach that focuses on the meanings reflected in and

created by discourses (usually interpretive and subjective)” (pg. 229). Utilizing this method helped me uncover the potentially political, cultural, and feminist meanings embedded in the “contributors’ notes”. How does the language that the women chose to use show resistance against the patriarchy? How do these women show their agency in a time when their freedoms as lesbians were stifled? Beins (2016) explores the concept of temporal intertextuality in feminist media studies and the necessity of examining the context within which media is embedded. It is vital to examine the “contributors’ notes” within the context in which they were written. Smith and Watson (2010) also stress the importance of examining context when doing autobiographical research and discourse analysis is the best way to examine the cultural climate in which the “contributors’ notes” were written. I want to not only understand what these women were saying, but develop as best an understanding as I can of where these women were writing from, both literally and figuratively. Trimble and Treiberg (2015) state that examining discourses can “expose everyday understandings about social and political life” (pg. 234). One of the goals of the project is to interpret how the contributors of *Sinister Wisdom* understood their own social and political place in society.

In order to achieve quality results from both a content analysis and discourse analysis, I created a Google spreadsheet to code each “contributor note”. This spreadsheet contained the information required to answer the guiding research questions I developed through my analysis of Smith and Watson’s (2010) guide to examining autobiographies. These questions can be found in appendix A. Using a spreadsheet allowed for all of the data to be strategically organized, stored in one location, and made readily available. I examined and coded the “contributors’ notes” sections from the first issue of every second year from 1976 to 1994 for a

total of 269 notes. All of these issues are available as PDFs on *Sinister Wisdom's* website, "sinisterwisdom.org".

Findings

My methods left me with a spreadsheet full of data. This was useful in that I now had organized and coherent data points, but that also was the problem. I had data points when the notes, the thing I am attempting to understand as a whole, should not be deconstructed into parts. Then the meaning is lost. I was leary about sub-categorizing my findings as I wanted to portray the contributors as whole, fully-realized women whose lives were not easily categorizable. However, the sheer amount of information and topics I wanted to discuss necessitated the following subheadings. Inherited identities refers to the aspects of these women that are inherent or familial such as race and religion. The section on educational work explores the contributors' careers and work and the creative pursuits section delves into the contributors' artistic endeavors such as writing and theatre. The goal of the challenging limitations section is to highlight the contributors' personal struggles and the fight to overcome these. Finally, the women relationships section explores the importance of relationships with other women to the contributors' and how this impacted much of their lives.

Inherited Identities

Race was one of the most often mentioned identities in the contributors notes. Interestingly, of those who mentioned their race, the most often stated was "white". This was interesting and surprising as white privilege often includes invisibility. Rich (1993) called it "white silence" (pg. 257). "White" is considered the norm and those who deviate from it are

more often pressured to describe or label their ethnicity. Those who are white are not only able to keep silent about their ethnicity, but perhaps do not consider it a core aspect of their identity as their ethnicity has never been subjected to discrimination or hate. It is a bodily feature as opposed to internal identity.

The white contributors' decision to include their own ethnicity speaks to a potential recognition of their own privilege and a desire for equality and openness within the *Sinister Wisdom* community. They are not silent about their whiteness and perhaps recognize the privilege that comes with it. Rich (1993) argues that whiteness, and race in general, is inextricably connected to power and power is a patriarchal concept. Perhaps whiteness, and race overall, was so commonly included in the notes as a means to strip race of this connection. In a feminist community like that of *Sinister Wisdom*, race could be mentioned more as a biographical and embodying fact than as an identity infused with implications of power and social worth. Saying that they were white definitely did not appear to be mentioned as a way to come across as more powerful, but as a simple fact, as a way to paint a mental picture of the contributor. It was perhaps more a nod to embodiment than it was a nod to social power and race relations.

Contributors' mentioning of whiteness could also have been done as a recognition of race relation issues of the second wave feminist movement. The Combahee River Collective was a Black feminist collective that was created in 1974 (Combahee River Collective, 1977). It was created in response to the whitening of feminism and the second wave's erasure of black women's involvement and intersectional issues. The Combahee River Collective states that "Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement

from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation” (Combahee River Collective, 1977, para. 4).

Feminism of the time was for middle to upper class white women, despite the involvement of Black, Asian, Indigenous, and other people of colour women. It is possible that *Sinister Wisdom* contributors included their whiteness as a way to recognize their own privilege, their own place within the second wave, and the racism that ran rampant through the feminist movement of the 1960s to the 1980s.

Of the contributors who brought up religion in their note, Judaism was the most often mentioned religion by a significant margin. In fact, it was not only mentioned, but discussed at length within many contributors’ notes. It was discussed in relation to parentage and childhood such as Isabelle Maynard who wrote that she came “from a family that never practiced Judaism, but [she’s] always known [she] was Jewish” and Susie Gaynes who said that she was the “only Jew in [her] class” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 325; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 324). It was discussed in relation to careers and practices. For example, Adrienne Cooper “direct[ed] education programs at the YIVO Institute For Jewish Research” and tova (uncapitalized in contributors’ notes) was on the “core editorial group of Bridges, a journal for Jewish Feminists” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 323; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 45, 1991, pg. 128). For those who identified as being Jewish, it seemed to permeate every aspect of their lives.

Grappling with their Jewish identity was common for many of the contributors. Gloria Kirchheimer wrote that she has “not solved problem of Jewish identity” and Jyl Felman stated that she has “always been in confusion about [her] Jewish identity” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue

29/30, 1986, pg. 324; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 323). Rich (1982) also discusses the confusion about her own Jewish identity. Anti-semitism was pervasive throughout Western culture and she questioned how she could accept this core aspect of herself in a society that told her it was something to be ashamed of. Telushkin and Prager (1983) argue that “hatred of the Jew has been humanity’s greatest hatred” (pg. 3). Anti-Semitism is a form of discrimination and prejudice that has persisted throughout modern history (Telushkin and Prager, 1983). Telushkin and Prager (1983) give many reasons as to why there is such a hatred towards Jews such as Jews being perceived as being elitist, as being racist themselves, and as being Communist, which would have been a particularly prevalent belief during the Cold War era. *Sinister Wisdom* contributor Enid Dame said that “Jewishness is cultural, ethical, social, and political” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 323). Teya Schaffer wrote that her “political work has focused on Jewish... issues” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 325). For Jewish contributors, their Jewishness was not just their religion, a piece of themselves that could be cut off and separated from the rest of their identity. It was intertwined so intricately, so delicately, to a person’s identity and sense of self that when society questioned Jewishness it was questioning their entire existence.

Rich (1982) asks of herself and the Jewish community “what [does] it mean to be a Jewish lesbian” (pg. 216). The Jewish contributors of *Sinister Wisdom* were asking themselves this very question as well. No answer was specifically given in the notes, but contributors discussed the ways in which they are trying to answer the question. Judy Freespirit stated that she was now “reclaiming part of my heritage among Jewish lesbians” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 323). Surrounding herself in a community of people who understood and had

perhaps gone through a similar struggle helped Judy embrace her Jewish identity. Jyl Felman gave “Jewish identity workshops” and JEB or Joan E. Biren “organized a dialogue group for Jewish lesbians and Jewish heterosexual women [and] the group is now starting to give workshops on homophobia in the mainstream Jewish community” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 323; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 324). Workshops are a form of informal education that are both highly personal and highly social. They are used to build community and perhaps that is what these workshops provided for the attendees. Struggling with identity, which many Jewish contributors appeared to be doing, is a highly personal and internal process. Externalizing the struggle in a group workshop perhaps provided some relief. Education is necessary for those who hold racist views, but the Jewish women of *Sinister Wisdom* highlight the importance of education for the targets of racism and anti-semitism. Education cannot only inform, but provide community and connection. For Jewish women whom were doubly marginalized the importance of community cannot be overstated. I hope that the women who struggled so with their Jewish identity found strength through togetherness with other Jewish women.

Religion is one of many identity characteristics that is given by an individual’s family. Another is an individual’s name. Some of the contributors used chosen names when publishing in *Sinister Wisdom* and this is significant regardless if their name was legally changed or not. Rich (1979) suggests that women are not allowed to create our own individual identities, our own self-definitions. A definition of something or someone cannot be removed from its name and a name cannot be removed from its definition. They are inextricably linked by our reliance on language and our inherent need for meaning. By choosing their own names, such as Debby

Earthdaughter, Judy Freespirit, and Elana Dykewomon, they are self-defining and creating an image of themselves through their names. Elana includes in her name parts of herself that are seemingly of intense value to her, namely, being a woman and a self-identified dyke. Judy seemingly expresses a desire and passion for and attachment to freedom. These women's names are strong attempts to self-define.

Contributors' usage of chosen names also potentially suggests a rejection of patrilineal family structures. Surnames, and therefore family identities, are based on the father of the family. Traditionally, wives take their husband's last name and the children are given the same without a second thought. The usage of chosen names renounces this patriarchal tradition. Ursula K. Le Guin, an iconic feminist science fiction author, published a short story in the *New Yorker* in 1985 that tells the story of the biblical character Eve unnamng all of the animals and freeing them of the expectations and limitations that came with the names Adam gave them. She was giving back the creatures' right to self-define and to choose for themselves. After all the animals were freed, Eve turned to Adam and said "“You and your father lent me this, gave it to me, actually. It's been really useful, but it doesn't exactly seem to fit very well lately”” (Le Guin, 1985, para. 9). The name “Eve” did not suit her anymore. It did not match up with who she had become. So she gave it back to Adam much like how some of the contributors chose their own name. Other contributors also went by just a first name or a chosen name such as Zana, Alien, and Jano. Each of these individuals may have chosen to do so for anonymity's sake, but it is possible it was done as an assertion of their freedom from patriarchy's hold on their right to self-define and self-name. The names given by men were not right for some of *Sinister Wisdom's* contributors nor were they right for Eve in Le Guin's story.

Self--definition and self-knowledge go hand in hand and not just knowledge of an individual's present, but of an individual's past. Rich (1979) stresses the importance of a woman knowing and understanding her own personal history. Without this knowledge, Rich (1979) argues that a woman will never be "self-defining" as she has no basis upon which to examine and understand her present circumstances, actions, and identities (pg. 149). I found that throughout the notes that I examined, discussions, not just mere mentionings, of parents and therefore discussions of personal history were quite common. Bernice Mennis wrote that her "father supported the family with a banana and tomato stand" (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 324). Maria Stecenko stated "my parents were Ukrainian refugees, fleeing Stalin's regime" (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 25, 1984, pg. 124). Josi Mata was the "eighth child in a migrant farmworker family" (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 51, 1993, pg. 111). Given the limited space allocated to the "contributors' notes" section in each *Sinister Wisdom* issue, it is noteworthy that these contributors' chose to discuss their personal and parental histories instead of, for example, their current publications or past projects. These women are explaining their pasts in order to explain who they are, in order to define themselves which Rich so vehemently argues is a right women are robbed of.

A person's self-definition can not be removed from their origin. For example, when Vera Williams stated that her parents "met in the NYC union movement", she is not only giving us detached biographical facts, but biographical insights (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 326). With this one phrase, Vera gives the reader an idea of what her upbringing was like. She was probably raised by politically left and politically active parents who taught her to fight for her rights and for her voice to be heard. Perhaps she was defined by this. Perhaps this is what led

her to write in *Sinister Wisdom*. The contributors' who chose to include a discussion of their parental history, and there were many, show a level of self-awareness that Rich argues is needed to be a self-defined and therefore self-controlled woman.

Some of the contributors also specifically discuss their relationship with their mothers. Terri Fredlund was raised by a "mother who worked for years in the same electrical plant" while Julie Greenberg was "raised by a mother who did full-time Civil Rights work" (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 45, 1991, pg. 128 ; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 323). The mother-daughter relationship is of vital importance according to Rich as she argues that it is our mothers who can teach us how to be strong women, but it is also our mothers who often pass on the ideals and ethics of the patriarchy. All of the contributors who discussed their moms seemingly did so with pride, as evidenced in the above examples. This gives hope that many of the contributors' mothers were able to teach their daughters strength and resilience. I can see why contributors wanted to include a discussion of their mothers for whom potentially and hopefully they learned so much from. I understand and appreciate that personal history gives insight into current self-definition. However, throughout my examination of the contributors' notes, I was surprised by how many chose to include a discussion of their parents. When these women had so many other identities, projects, abilities, and relationships to include in their short and space-limited notes, why did an overwhelming amount discuss their parents?

One potential answer can be gleaned from a simple statement of Rich's. She argues that "motherhood is central to the lives of women" (1976, pg. 113). The patriarchy, upon which society is built, demands that women be limited and defined based on their necessary role as mothers. I would argue that this also extends to the role of daughters. The roles of motherhood

and daughterhood cannot be easily separated. Daughterhood, in addition to motherhood, is central to the lives of women. Historically, women were the property of their fathers up to the moment that they became the property of their husbands. Daughters are expected to care for aging parents more than sons are. Perhaps so many of the contributors' notes include a discussion of parents because the patriarchy has tied women to the role of daughter as it has to the role of mother. The contributors are societally taught and expected to have daughterhood as an important part of their identity, of their self-definition. I doubt that a contributors' notes section of a journal for cisgender men would include as many discussions of parents because men were and are given the freedom to define themselves beyond familial roles. Beatrice Ilana Lieberman began her note by saying that she was the "daughter of Estelle and Gershon" (Sinister Wisdom Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 325). Judy Freespirit wrote that she was the "only child of two first generation non-observant Jews" (Sinister Wisdom Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 323). As previously examined, discussions of personal history are important, and, according to Rich, necessary in order for women to "become a self-conscious, self-defining human being" (pg. 149). However, the overwhelming amount of parental history given in the contributors' notes potentially shows that not only has the patriarchy buried motherhood into women's identities, but also daughterhood.

Educational Work

Rich (1976) argues that many women in fact have two mothers. One being their biological mom and the other being an inspirational counteracting mother figure who has recognized and rejected the influence of patriarchy in her own life. Rich (1976) calls these women "counter-mother(s)" and states that they are often an "unmarried woman professor...

who represents the choice of a vigorous work life” (pg. 138). “Choice” here being the keyword as, previously discussed, women were not given choices, but were told that their place was in the home with children. Given the preponderance of *Sinister Wisdom* contributors who were also professors or teachers, I would be inclined to suggest that women not only found these “counter-mothers”, but actively created hypothetical ones or became their own. Rich (1976) argues that “thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted” (pg. 125). The daughters that Rich speaks of are of the same generation who contributed to *Sinister Wisdom*. It was a generation of an increasing awareness of the self and the societal forces acting on the self. These daughters saw, recognized, and understood the struggle of their mothers and found an actual, existing “counter-mother” or painted a mental picture of who she could be, a mental model of a “free” woman and sought out becoming her.

A substantial amount of *Sinister Wisdom* contributors were professors or in the teaching profession and of these educators most were in the fields of women’s studies, history, or literature. This connects directly to Rich’s concept of a “counter-mother”. For example, Lynda Koolish was a “feminist scholar teaching Afro American and American literature at San Diego State University” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 39, 1989, pg. 134). Nicky Morris “teaches feminist studies, writing, and literature at Goddard college” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 34, 1988, pg. 120). Many contributors also identified themselves as students such as Beth Povinelli who was a “graduate student in anthropology at Yale” and Nava Mizrahhi was a “full-time science student” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 23, 1988, pg. 121; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 324). Given

the high concentrations of contributors in the San Francisco Area and the New York area, it is entirely possible that professor contributors were the actual “counter-mothers” for student contributors. *Sinister Wisdom* might have figuratively and literally been handed down from “counter-mothers” to the next generation. Besides both being in academia, students and educators potentially have many attributes and values in common, particularly within the current discussion of *Sinister Wisdom* contributors.

One such shared value is self-education. Rich (1979) states that most of a woman’s education will be the education she provides for herself. Society sees no value in teaching women, as a post-secondary degree is not particularly useful when fulfilling the roles of wife and mother, so they taught themselves. Some of the educators and students reject this rejection and sought education and employment their own way and on their own terms. Max Dashu “teaches women’s history freelance” and proudly identified as being “uncredentialed” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 34, 1988, pg. 119; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 39, 1988, pg. 132). Susan Hubert “escaped from a college writing program and is just learning to write again” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 39, 1988, pg. 133). To use the word “escape” indicates a sense of being held against your will, of being controlled in a way that you did not agree to. Susan had to leave a formal education setting in order to achieve the education she wanted and needed. These notes suggest not only a strong desire within the contributors to learn and work under no one’s conditions except their own, but also a fierce determination to learn skills for themselves. Self-education was not only necessary, as Rich suggests it is for most women, but a crucial and gratifying experience for some contributors.

Educators are in a unique position in that they exercise some control over the environments they work in. Many of the contributors that were educators seemingly rejected traditional methods and institutions. A significant amount of them taught workshops on writing and women's studies. Michele A. Belluomini "has researched and facilitated workshops and classes on the subject of the matriarchy" (Sinister Wisdom Issue 19, 1982, pg. 110). Irena Klepfisz works at a "women's voices creative writing workshop" and Judy Grahn "teaches classes in writing and in gay culture at Mama Bears Coffee House" (Sinister Wisdom Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 324; Sinister Wisdom Issue 25, 1984, pg. 124). These are just a few examples of many. Workshops are often a blend of informal education, community building, and creative pursuits. This is perhaps why running workshops was seemingly so appealing. It was a rejection of the traditional highly regulated and patriarchal educational structure. Workshops are also attended by choice. The women who taught and attended workshops were engaging in self-education. Working at alternative schools was also a trend in the notes. Beatrice Ilana Lieberman "ran an experimental pre-school for 8 years" and Vera Williams "has been busy with alternative school building" (Sinister Wisdom Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 324; Sinister Wisdom Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 325). Alternative schools were also a rejection of traditional teaching methods and institutions. They were aimed at providing the next generation with a new way of examining the world and potentially the patriarchal ideals embedded in it. The very word "alternative" suggests choice and that is what these women were searching for.

However, the argument that these and other women had to teach workshops and in alternative schools because they themselves were rejected by traditional institutions is potentially valid. Sexism is and was rampant throughout educational institutions. Perhaps teaching

workshops was a last resort after having been repeatedly turned away from schools. However, many of the contributors were professors at elite universities such as Irene Eber who taught “Chinese history and literature at the Hebrew University” and Paula Gunn Allen who was a “visiting lecturer in Native American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley” (Sinister Wisdom Issue 29/30, 1985, pg. 323; Sinister Wisdom Issue 19, 1982, pg. 110). This not only shows that women were granted access to working at universities, but thrived at them. It is highly possible that these contributors had class and race privileges that boosted their academic pedigree. However, I would argue that running workshops was a choice taken by these contributors as a way to self-educate, educate and connect with other women, exert control over their educations and careers, and reject traditional and patriarchal education systems. Rich (1980) argues that “enforced ignorance has been a crucial key to our powerlessness” (pg. 150). What a better way to cast off this enforced ignorance than by saying that we will learn in spite of you. We will give to ourselves what has been denied us. We will teach and grow and connect in places you deem beneath you and we will create a knowledge empire all on our own.

Patriarchal social power and control are evident in education and all societal institutions including, and perhaps especially, in the justice system. One of the many surprising findings was the number of contributors who discuss prisons. Diana Bickston suggests that they were in prison when they said that they “began writing in a prison workshop” (Sinister Wisdom Issue 19, 1982, pg. 110). Many contributors discuss working in prisons. Bernice Mennis taught literature and writing in a prison and Juana Maria Paz “coordinate[d] a prison reading project that [made] reading materials available to incarcerated Third World women” (Sinister Wisdom Issue 34, 1988; Sinister Wisdom Issue 335, 1984, pg. 125). This suggests an understanding of and an urge

to support the most disenfranchised of society. There was a grassroots movement in the 1970s among feminists against incarceration (Thuma, 2014). For example, in Boston, an area in which many *Sinister Wisdom* contributors lived, the feminist group Coalition Against Institutional Violence organized a protest and march against the opening of a mental health hospital for violent women that would be owned and operated by the Massachusetts Women's Prison (Thuma, 2014). Thuma (2014) states that "these activists sought to name and illuminate what they understood to be the structural and social conditions of violence in imprisoned women's lives, from manifestations of racial, economic, and gender oppression to the process of institutionalization itself" (pg. 27). The *Sinister Wisdom* contributors who worked in prison most likely shared similar views. Some, and an argument could be made for many, of those in prison are in that position because of a broken justice system that takes class and race into consideration more than the law (Rich, 1993). The contributors of *Sinister Wisdom* who worked in prisons perhaps recognized the institutional violence that incarcerated women endure. Many of the contributors discussed their political and activist pursuits, particularly for social justice and feminist issues. Working in prisons would perhaps just be an extension of this for some.

Those who did work in prisons were teachers of writing and literature or focused on literacy. This speaks to the previously discussed values of a right to education and a right to self-define. Perhaps *Sinister Wisdom* contributors appreciated the value of these in their own life and recognized how prisons stripped people of these rights. Rich (2006) states that the broken justice system of Western society is "silencing potential and actual writers, intellectuals, artists, journalists: a whole intelligentsia" (pg. 357). By keeping people behind bars and locked away, society is eradicating their potential and diminishing their identity to that of an unnamed

prisoner. Society is then left without a whole point of view, without an understanding of the lives of people in prison, without an appreciation for the unique individuals who make up the incarcerated population. Those contributors who worked in prison worked to bring this point of view out from behind bars or at least give prisoners an opportunity to explore their own identity and self-define beyond that of prisoner. They worked to give prisoners both words and the voice with which to speak those words.

Teachers, students, workshop organizers, alternative school builders, and political activists, an overwhelming amount of contributors' careers and activities revolved around knowledge creation and dispersion. And the relatively common careers of editors and publishers among *Sinister Wisdom* contributors are also knowledge creation careers. Many contributors identified as being editors and publishers, particularly of feminist magazines and anthologies. For example, Maureen Brady was a "co-founder and publisher of *Spinsters, Ink.*" and Linda J. Brown was an "editor of *Azalea* (a magazine by third world lesbians)" (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 12, 1980, pg. 100; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 12, 1980, pg. 100). Barbara Smith was a "co-editor of *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*" and Anna Livia was a "co-editor of *Gossip*, a journal of lesbian feminist ethics" (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 19, 1982, pg. 111; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 34, 1988, pg. 120). There were so many publications, so many women creating and dispersing feminist ideas. Rich (1977) bestows upon her readers the idea of "claiming an education". "Claiming" is such an active, strong, and decisive action. The contributors of *Sinister Wisdom* who were educators and editors were claiming not only their own education, but claiming an education for all women, claiming that there was a previously untapped resource of ideas, consciousness, and power within the

minds of women. Educating women, whether it be at Berkeley or at a workshop at the local community centre, and publishing women unleashed these resources onto an unsuspecting and unprepared patriarchy. Educators and editors not only opened the floodgates of their own education and minds, but did so for countless other women .

Creative Pursuits

Knowledge creation and dispersion careers completely and utterly rely on words. There would be no classrooms or anthologies without them. Not only do many of the careers of contributors rely on words, but words seemed to have played a large role in many aspects of their lives. This is apropos of *Sinister Wisdom* being a journal of writings, but how these women described their relationship to words and writing is worthy of engagement. Several women discuss the healing nature of writing and how, through writing, personal traumas and struggles have been overcome or at least attempted to. Martha Courtot said that she wrote “out of deep woundedness” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 45, 1991, pg. 126). Amy Concepcion wrote that she was “living in exile and trying to capture with my writings the forgotten memories of a happy childhood and the everlasting pain of a mixed identity” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 51, 1993, pg. 109). Writing takes the chaos of the mind and the scars of the soul and names them, makes them known. What was scattered and fragmented is put into neat, coherent rows of letters. Writing pulls the pain up from where it was buried and allows it to trickle out through the fingertips. Rich (1997) states that “the writer is, by the nature of the act of writing, someone who strives for communication and connection, someone who searches, through language, to keep alive the conversation” (pg. 337). I would argue that Rich is not only talking about a connection and communication with others, but with the self. Rich valued self-exploration and self-definition.

Writing is a highly effective way of doing this, particularly in a world designed by and for the patriarchy in which the roles and value given to women are severely limiting. Writing is healing.

Sinister Wisdom contributors also discuss the freeing ability of writing. Jeannie Witkin wrote that “writing lets me speak for myself” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 51, 1993, pg. 110). For Jill Drew, writing was the only thing she did that wasn’t hypocritical (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 25, 1984). Martha Boethal said “for as long as I can remember, I’ve been writing in order to survive and understand my environment” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 19, 1982, pg. 110). Writing offered these women, and I am sure many countless others, both a limitless terrain to explore that was bound only by their imaginations and a means of connecting with and understanding the realities of their lives. Rich (1971) argued that “when women can stop being haunted... by the internalized fears of being and saying themselves, then it is an extraordinary moment for the woman writer” (pg. 5). Women and girls’ minds are infected by the incessant nattering of society, reminding them of their limits and their proper places. This infection eats away at a woman’s ability to imagine and become a self beyond these limits. Writing is an antidote. The contributors of *Sinister Wisdom* recognized this and through writing were made more free.

Being a writer was the most often mentioned characteristic in the contributors notes. The passion with which these women wrote about writing was riveting and inspirational. Writing was a lifeline, an obsession. Donna Allegra said that “writing is my basic path in life” and I am sure she is not the only contributor that believed this (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 34, 1988, pg. 119). Writing was a means by which to heal and free themselves, connect with other women, and imagine a feminist future. Rich theorized that there is a special and innate connection between the words written in the present and the realities of the future (1971). What we write and think

about in the abstract today has the potential to be an actuality tomorrow. The contributors' passion for writing is evident throughout the notes and Rich argues that passion is an absolute necessity for survival (1980). I wholeheartedly agree and I believe so would the women of *Sinister Wisdom*. For them, writing was an occupation, a labour of love done only during the lunch hour, a political act, and an art.

Writing was not the only art form that many contributors pursued. Artistic pursuits ranged from theatre to photographer, from painter to comedy. Art is a means of communicating and connecting, and this purpose of art was of particular importance before the age of social media. For example, the #metoo movement is an online phenomenon that connected thousands of women across the globe. Women were able to use Twitter and hashtags to tell their story, to show their truth. Before social media, art was one of the few ways to do this. It was one of the few outlets available for self-expression. Art movements emerged out of a new way of seeing the world. Rich (1997) argues that art created by women is the concrete and physical representation of the ideas and consciousness of the women's movement. Art movements emerged out of a new way of seeing the world and the art of the women's movement put a magnifying lens on women's issues. What was hidden or ignored was now put on display.

One of the most popular mentions of the contributors engaging in artistic endeavours, besides writing, was theatre. There were many mentions of theatre production groups such as "Pearlchild Productions", "Mothertongue Readers' Theatre", and "Wry Crips" (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 5, 1978, pg. 103); *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 323; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 39, 1989, pg. 132). The contributors' notes presented an interesting contrast between expressed passions for the presumably more introverted activity of writing to the more extroverted activity

of acting. What is it about acting that drew so many contributors to it? Rich (1984) argues that art, whether it be the creation, appreciation, or examination of it, cannot be “separated from the social fabric” (pg. 243). Perhaps what appealed to these women was the ability theatre gave them to explore roles and personas outside of the severely limiting motherhood and daughterhood roles as previously discussed. The social fabric had binded women so tightly to a prescribed femininity and theatre was a figurative loosening of the corset. Perhaps theatre provided an opportunity to be someone else, to not have to exist within a patriarchal society. Theatre is an embodied art. In a society in which women’s bodies are so heavily supervised and regulated, the fact that theatre included the body and perhaps shed some of its regulations was freeing to *Sinister Wisdom* contributors. Before the 1960s, women’s roles in theatre were extremely limited and attending the theatre was a luxury afforded only by the upper-class, meaning mainly white men (Wandor, 1984). Essentially, women had no place in the theatre and what space they could find was controlled by men in the theatre. However, in the 1970s, fringe theatres started to emerge and these small theatre groups opened up possibilities for women (Wandor, 1984). It is these fringe theatre groups that *Sinister Wisdom* contributors participated in.

Several of the contributors also discussed mystic arts. Astrology was particularly relevant with many contributors naming their sign. In fact, astrology was mentioned more often than any religion combined, with the exception of Judaism. Crystals were also mentioned such as by Naja Sorella who stated that “stones and crystals are my preferred people to hang out with” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 39, 1989, pg. 135)). Witches were also used to describe the contributors. For example, Linda J. Brown identified as a “witch-woman” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 12, 1980, pg. 100). Astrology, crystals, and identifying as witches do not necessarily speak to a religion, but

they are connected to spirituality and the fact that astrology was so prominent speaks to a spiritual consciousness shared by at least some of the contributors. I was intrigued by this. What is it about astrology and the mystic arts overall that is so appealing among the writers of a lesbian political journal? Rich (1984) argues that women have been alienated from every societal institution such as government, the judicial system, and the economy. Religion is included in this. Stone (1976) in her book “When God Was A Woman” states that Judeo-Christian religions use the Adam and Eve tale to blame Eve, and by extension all women, for the fall of humankind and thusly argue that women should be under male control. Before these religions were developed, prehistoric religions often had goddesses, and not gods, as the supreme creators (Stone, 1976). Stone (1976) urges all women to look beyond Judeo-Christian traditions to a past in which goddesses were very much valued in order to create a different feminist future that can include religion. Astrology, which is often connected to a belief in goddesses, fulfilled spiritual needs for women who were alienated out of organized religions. Astrology allowed contributors to explore their own religions and spirituality on their own terms without being silenced by Judeo-Christian traditions.

Challenging Limitations

Silence. Is that not what the patriarchy demands of those it deems unsuitable or unworthy of a public existence such as mothers, lesbians, Jewish women, and incarcerated individuals? If these people say anything about their place in society is that not a direct attack on patriarchy? Therefore, silence is prescribed, enforced, and imposed. Rich (1984) speaks of “dead silence” which is “a silence of language forbidden to be spoken, a vocabulary declared defunct, of evidence destroyed” (pg. 330). This silence is “dead” on behalf of those who are forced to

embrace it, but it is quite an active and “alive” silence on behalf of those doing the enforcing. Measures are taken, such as in the previously discussed justice system, to ensure this silence. The contributors of *Sinister Wisdom* voraciously defy this silence, not just by being contributors to a lesbian political periodical, but throughout their daily lives. Rustun Wood says that she “refuses to be silenced” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 51, 1993, pg. 112). Alien concurred by saying that she “tells the secrets of [her] soul to anyone that will listen” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 45, 1991, pg. 125). She is not being silent. She is not being held back. The “anyone that will listen” phrase suggests that sometimes she encounters resistance to her speaking her truth, that not everyone will listen. She is rallying against this and so are all the women of *Sinister Wisdom*.

How the contributors describe their silence indicates the internalized nature of this silence. Martha Courtot said that her “worst struggle is against the voice that tells me to keep silent” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 45, 1991, pg. 126). This voice is not named or embodied in any way suggesting it is an internal voice. It is her own self that is enforcing the silence. Patriarchy’s demand for silence from women is so pervasive, penetrating, and ubiquitous that women start to tell their own selves to keep quiet, to remain voiceless. How absolutely terrifying this is. Rich (1976) said that “in silence, she is putting another stitch in her own shroud” (pg. 139). What a powerful statement and image about the ways in which self-enforced silence not only limits us, but defeats us. Jen Benka said that she tries “with [her] work to combat denial, repression, and silence. Mine and yours” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 51, 1993, pg. 110). I do not think the word “combat” is used lightly or glibly here. I do however think that the word was chosen very deliberately. It is a war. War is never easy and nor are the soldiers ever left unscathed. What

personal prices did these women pay to be able to speak? What was the cost of tearing off the shroud?

Refusing to be silenced is just one of the many ways that the contributors fought against patriarchy. Some mentioned the patriarchy outright in their note such as Zana who said that “[her] dreams are strong and [she] looks to realize them through replacing [her] patriarchal conditioning with womon-values, bit-by-bit” (Sinister Wisdom Issue 34, 1988, pg. 121). Note the usage of “womon” to defy even how language is infused with patriarchal power as the word “woman” uses “man” as its root, as the point of origin, as part of the definition. Just like how the women who discuss silence suggested the internalization of patriarchy, Zana mentions outright how she has been conditioned and molded by it. She somehow has been made aware of it, perhaps by a “counter-mother”, and is now rallying against it. Tatiana de la Tierra discusses in her note how she is “seeking total transformation from self-hatred” (Sinister Wisdom Issue 51, 1993, 113). Hate is not naturally occurring. Hate is only learned. Tatiana has been taught to hate herself. Perhaps self-hatred is one of the few things the patriarchy deems women are worthy of learning. Self-hatred, on the part of women at least, keeps the gender hierarchy from crumbling. If the people on the bottom believe that is the position they deserve, then no challenging of those at the top will ever come. Rich (1977;1979) repeatedly, whether directly or indirectly, urges women to take responsibility for themselves. Rich (1973) said that “responsibility to yourself means refusing to let others do your thinking, talking and naming for you” (pg. 29). The word “naming” connects to the previous discussions on self-definition. Once something is named, it is defined. Rich is urging us to not let anything other than our own selves define who we are, to not let self-hate define what we are capable of.

By keeping women silent and by not letting us self-define, our patriarchal and heteronormative society is placing strict and seemingly immovable boundaries around a woman. Rich (1976) argues that “the most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits” (pg. 137). We are, or at least should be according to societal expectations, limited to the role of mother, limited in terms of education, and limited in terms of self-expression, just to name a few. All Sinister Wisdom contributors are defying these limitations. They are pushing up against them, hopefully to the point of shattering them. So many discuss resistance. Judith Wachs “joined her daughter in initiating the first suit against little league to admit girls” (Sinister Wisdom Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 326). This here is a quite literal boundary of women and girls not being able to play baseball that Judith is blazing a trail against. Donna Allegra discussed being an electrician and alluded to the sexual harassment she had to endure (Sinister Wisdom Issue 34, 1988, pg. 119). An electrician is no job for a woman, is perhaps what these men were thinking. She defied a limitation and was punished for it. C.E. Atkins was “learning to play the drums” (Sinister Wisdom Issue 51, 1993, pg. 109). This is a seemingly inconsequential nugget of trivia, but it in fact suggests a defying of limitations. Firstly, music is traditionally, and an argument could be made for presently, male-dominanted. There are few, if any, well-known woman classical composers. For that matter, there are few, if any, well-known woman drummers. Secondly, C.E. used the word “learning”. Knowledge, self-improvement, and mastery are all things associated with learning and are all things that the patriarchy claims women do not need. Learning is defying. So many of the contributors are in knowledge-creation fields and so many are students, but I would argue that all of the contributors are in some way learners.

In addition to societal and cultural limitations, women are also restricted by spatial boundaries. Patriarchy contends that a woman's place is in the home, a home she does not technically own or have any financial investment in. Rich (1973) argues that women can resist limitations by refusing to "stay in the places assigned to us" (pg. 29). These "places" are not only societal roles, but physical and geographic spaces. Patriarchy contends that a woman's place is in the home, a home she does not technically own or have any financial stake in, to take care of children and husbands. They should not live on their own. Many of the contributors discuss their own private dwellings. Caroljean Coventree described herself as living "in an old, old house where two wide rivers join" and Sawnie Morris lived in an "adobe barn... where she chops wood, hauls water" (Sinister Wisdom Issue 45, 1991, pg. 125; Sinister Wisdom Issue 34, 1988, pg. 120). These women are self-sufficient and are living outside the boundaries set regarding standard femininity. Chopping wood and hauling water is significant as these are often imagined as being the duties of a man. The woods, mountains, and wilderness in general are associated with ruggedness, savageness, harshness; essentially with masculinity. A large amount of contributors mention wilderness and the importance of nature in their lives. Jeannie Witkin was "happiest when climbing tall trees" and Celeste Tibbets wanted "to one day be a farmer as well" (Sinister Wisdom Issue 51, 1993, pg. 110; Sinister Wisdom Issue 19, 1982, pg. 111). Judith Niemi was "a partner in Woodswoman, leading women on canoeing trips in the north woods" (Sinister Wisdom Issue 12, 1980, pg. 100). She helped women find for themselves the beauty and power of nature on their own terms, a delight not offered to many women. These women are all refusing the spaces assigned to them. They are quite literally breaking boundaries by not only existing outside of a man's house, but thriving outside of one. Multiple contributors

mentioned that they live in the woods, country, or by the sea. These allusions to geographically distant places suggest a mental distancing as well. A distancing from the expectation of not only being partnered with a man, but longing for such a partnership; what Rich calls “compulsory heterosexuality”.

Women Relationships

Heterosexuality is inextricably connected to procreation. A biological male and female, or at least their gametes, are necessary in order to reproduce and contribute to the future of humankind. This connection between heterosexuality and procreation is the basis upon which society’s family structures, roles, and expectations are built. Gay and lesbian individuals often face extreme difficulty in becoming parents. For example, in 1987, an American presidential task force put forth recommendations that adoption agencies and family courts should prevent adoptions for homosexual parents (Erich et al., 2005). This was a federally mandated recommendation that no doubt influenced countless gay and lesbian individuals trying to adopt. In the 1960s to the 1990s, and perhaps even later, lesbian moms were denied custody of their children (Martin & Lyon, 1985). Erich et al. (2005) state that “many judges suggest that children raised by gay and lesbian parents are more likely to develop psychological problems, to be sexually molested, to contract AIDS, to exhibit poor gender identity and confused sexual orientation, and to suffer social stigmatization” (pg. 19). These are monstrous and categorically untrue allegations, and yet lesbian mothers had to contend with these speculations. This was occurring during the time period of *Sinister Wisdom* and this context must be taken into consideration when discussing how being mothers was a theme present in the contributors’ notes. Specifically, twenty two or nearly ten percent of the contributors’ mention having children of

their own. Some simply identified themselves as a mother while others discussed their children and their relationships with their children such as Jill Drew who said that she “pushed two thirds of my children out of the home due to advancing age (mine) and diminishing tolerance (also mine)” (Sinister Wisdom Issue 25, 1984, pg. 124). The time period that I have chosen for this project was a time period in which it was not only incredibly difficult to be a lesbian mother, but potentially dangerous. Yet for some contributors, motherhood seemed to be a source of great joy, fulfillment, and life-altering love. For example, Denise Jacobson gushes about her “beautiful two-year-old, David” and Judy Freespirit who describes being in love with new baby Amy (Sinister Wisdom Issue 39, 1989, pg. 133; Sinister Wisdom Issue 39, 1989, pg. 133). Being a lesbian mother, which I am assuming at least some of the contributors were, was not an easy role to obtain and defend.

The fact that ten percent of the contributors mention being a mother does not mean nor should it be assumed that the remaining ninety percent of the contributors did not have children. Rich (1976) argues that “motherhood... is one part of female process; it is not an identity for all time” (pg. 102). By perhaps not including their role as a mother in their note, some contributors were self-defining beyond motherhood, were rejecting the patriarchal limitation that mothers are all that women are capable of being. Sometimes what is left out is even more telling than what is included. Whether or not the remaining ninety percent did or did not have children can only ever be speculation as zero contributors made mention of not having or not wanting children. Perhaps this is a coincidence or in line with a lesbian art and political journal or perhaps it was done consciously. Perhaps it was done with intention to bring attention to the societal expectation that women’s lives are fulfilled with motherhood and are a “barren” wasteland without it. Perhaps, in

addition to this, contributors of *Sinister Wisdom* saw motherhood for what it actually was and is: a choice. It is not common practice for people to discuss the choices they did not take when they are happy with the ones they did. A person who enjoys a delicious and satisfying dinner usually does not discuss what did not appeal to them on the menu, but lavishly extols the tastes of what was eaten. It is possible that some of the contributors saw motherhood as a choice, as a viable but personally unappealing road not taken. Motherhood was not mentioned because it simply did not matter nor take any precedence for them. For one contributor motherhood was clearly a self-defining choice. Julie Greenberg states with a well-deserved sense of pride that she is “planning on becoming a single parent in the near future” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986, pg. 323). For her, motherhood is considered and chosen, not a role forced upon her. This is the taking back of motherhood from the hands of the patriarchy and placing it firmly back into the hands of mothers for them to do with it what they wish. Motherhood is a relationship and role that the patriarchy demands of women, much in the same way that the patriarchy demands women be heterosexual.

It was not surprising to find that nearly a third of the contributors mention being lesbian. In fact, I found it more surprising that it was not included in a larger percentage of the notes. *Sinister Wisdom* was created to be a periodical run by and for lesbians. The periodical’s website states that “it was lesbian - feminism in action” (sinisterwisdom.org, n.d., para. 1). With keeping this dedication to a specific lesbian-feminist identity and ideology in mind, can I, as a subjective autobiography reader, assume that all of the contributors were lesbian? Can I assume that Rose Magyar who mentions having a husband was actually a lesbian living a heterosexual lie (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 29/30, 1986)? If I were limiting my definition of lesbian as a woman who is

romantically and sexually attracted to other women then no I cannot assume this. However, if I think of lesbian relationships in the context of Rich's "lesbian continuum", then yes I can create that assumption (1980, pg. 178). Rich's argument is that lesbian relationships exist on a continuum in which all woman-oriented relationships exist, including friendships, sisterhoods, and familial relationships. They are not solely defined by sexual attraction or activity, but by "woman-identified experience" (Rich, 1980, pg. 178). Women want to know, love, and connect with other women. However, Rich (1980) states that "women are made taboo to women - not just sexually, but as comrades, cocreators, conspirators" (pg. 146). We are kept apart no matter where the woman-woman relationship we are looking for falls on the continuum. It is in this sense that I can assume all of the contributors were lesbians in that the connections they were searching for were with other women. I must turn to one of the two core questions that the creators of *Sinister Wisdom* started with, namely, "how does she think without thinking 'their' thoughts, dreaming 'their' dreams, repeating 'their' patterns?" (sinisterwisdom.org, n.d., para. 1). The "they" are, to be simple and blunt, men. *Sinister Wisdom* and its creators were aiming to explore what would happen if women were free to create relationships with each other at any point on the lesbian continuum, if there was a societal recognition and appreciation for the power of women relationships. Rich (1980) states that "the denial of reality and visibility to women's passion for women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community, the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves, and each other" (pg. 187). The goal of *Sinister Wisdom* was to

reverse this denial and by doing so empower women to seek out relationships with each other at every point of the lesbian continuum and to remove the taboo nature of these relationships.

According to societal and cultural expectations, the core relationship we as women should be seeking out is one with a male sexual partner. It is through this relationship that we will fulfill our ultimate duty of being a mother. This role does not require any sort of relationship with women, thus completely negating the lesbian continuum that *Sinister Wisdom* seemingly embraced. According to compulsory heterosexuality, we should not only be okay with this, but find ultimate happiness and fulfillment with this marital relationship. Instead, we seek out women to connect and grow with, even if we do not identify with the sexual orientation of lesbian. This is what Rich refers to when she describes the lesbian continuum. Several of the contributors discuss relationships with women that are not overtly sexual. Bernice Mennis mentioned how she was building a home and sharing land with friends who were women (Sinister Wisdom Issue 34, 1988, pg. 120). Beverly A'Court lived “by the sea, with four other lesbians” (Sinister Wisdom Issue 25, 1984, pg. 124). Caroljean Coventree wrote “lesbian friends and wildness are often at my door. I am thankful” (Sinister Wisdom Issue 45, 1991, pg. 125). These women desire, appreciate, and cherish their relationships with other women. Each of these relationships exists on the lesbian continuum, regardless of whether each woman identified as a lesbian or had sexual interactions with each other.

Several of the contributors lived with other lesbians and even more identified as being lesbian separatists. Debby Earthdaughter was “working with SHE land to establish land for dykes with disabilities and our allies” (Sinister Wisdom Issue 45, 1991, pg. 126). Shemaya Mountain Laurel lived in the “middle of nowhere on El Safe Dykes’ Land” (Sinister Wisdom

Issue 39, 1989, 134). Zana was “part of a lesbian country community” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 39, 1989, pg. 121). Lesbian separatism not only allowed for women to own and be responsible for their own land and for relationships of all kinds to develop between women, but also served as a political declaration and action. Historically, lesbians have been denied a public and political existence (Rich, 1980). All historical evidence of lesbians such as letters and journals have been destroyed in order to keep heterosexuality compulsory for women (Rich, 1980). Owning their own land has allowed lesbians to declare themselves as existing, as a rejection of the history of erasure that has come to define their heritage. Lesbian separatism is political, cultural, historical, and relational. It is relational in the sense that separatists predominantly lived together in communities, such as Shemaya and Zana. Sharing land was one of many ways that the contributors of *Sinister Wisdom* created connections with other women.

Another very popular way of connecting was by being a member of women’s groups. Many were members of writing groups such as the “Jemima Writers’ Collective”, “Gap Tooth Girlfriends”, “Feminist Writers’ Guild”, “Overload”, and “Durham Lesbian Writers Group” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 12, 1980, pg. 100; *Sinister Wisdom* 34, 1988, pg. 119; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 19, 1982, pg. 110; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 25, 1984, pg. 124; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 51, 1993, 111). Kath Rodgers was a member of “Lesbian Visual Artists” and Sawnie Morris participated “in a thirteen member, lesbian eclectic ritual and meditation group” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 51, 1993, pg. 111; *Sinister Wisdom* Issue 34, 1988, 120). Jackie Winnow was the “founder of the Women’s Cancer Resource Centre” (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 39, 1989, pg. 135). All of these groups assisted women in building relationships along the lesbian continuum and helped each individual break through limitations. Rich (1980) argued that “women identification

is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality” (pg. 187). Women’s groups not only energized individual women, but also feminism’s political power. Compulsory heterosexuality is the utmost limitation society places on women and women’s groups challenged it simply by existing. Within each group existed an exchange of ideas, a growth of women-identification, and, hopefully, an increase in strength.

Conclusion

The unique identity of each contributor was evident in the notes. However, specific trends did appear. Defying limits was certainly one of these major trends. It was present in every note which is not surprising as these women challenged gender limitations just by contributing to *Sinister Wisdom* in the first place. However, they also did so much more than that. Being a professor, which so many were, was defying educational and professional limitations. Some owned their own home and land which challenged economic and geographic limitations. An overwhelming majority did not focus their autobiographical note on their children or lack thereof and this challenged the limitation of acceptable roles (ie motherhood) for women. This trend of defying limitations feeds into the larger overarching trend of searching for connections, particularly to women and themselves. Why defy limitations if not to connect to the person you want or think you should be? These women were self-defining, they were connecting the dots between their future aspirations and present circumstances. The contributors were searching for a community that would help them bridge this gap or discussing with joy the communities they

had already found. I would argue that connection was the reason behind the contributors' notes section in the first place. It served as a meeting point between readers and contributors.

I went into this project with the goal of finding trends, commonalities, and identities that the contributors of *Sinister Wisdom* shared. I found these, but what was even more potent and surprising were the connections I felt with these women. I was inspired by Diane Hugs who said that "being virtually bed-bound and blind would be rough on any writer, but it's coming" (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 39, 1989, pg. 133). Her optimism leaped off the page. I pictured Jasmine Merah so clearly when she described herself as "fat, forty, furious" (*Sinister Wisdom* Issue 39, 1989, pg. 134). By the alliteration and delightfully snarky clipped tone, I pictured her as a strong, sarcastic, formidable woman who did not do anything she did not want to do. I wanted to be like her. When these women described their future plans, I yearned to know how it turned out. When they expressed their lesbian separatist and feminist views, I wondered what they think or would think of the world now and the state of feminism and the struggles of modern women. Do we want the same things as women in the seventies wanted? How are we similar? How are we different? To be able to sit and have a chat with Jasmine would be extraordinary.

Alas, all we have, all I have are the contributors' notes and this too is an extraordinary thing. I can and have engaged in a dialogue with women who fifty years ago wrote poetry, stories, or essays in a lesbian politics and art journal. I can do this based entirely on a short autobiographical blurb found on the final few pages of each issue of *Sinister Wisdom*. When writing these blurbs I wonder what each woman was thinking. I wonder if they thought about the future feminist generations who would find them, read them, love them, and learn from them. I doubt many did as these women were women just seemingly trying to survive, self-define,

connect, and contribute. These are the extraordinary ordinary women. These are the trailblazers who paved the way for students like myself. Rich (1982) stated that “when there’s nobody to ‘inspire the behavior’, act out of the culture, there is an atrophy, a dwindling, which is partly invisible” (pg. 210). It is invisible because we would have not known about the possibilities that lie outside of the culture, off of the beaten path, if no one dares to take the first step. We would have just kept plodding along the path that was so worn down by those that came before us and never looking up. The individuals who make up the contributors are some of the unnamed and unknown inspirers of feminism. Perhaps they have served as counter-mothers for *Sinister Wisdom* readers, for their students, for their friends, for their co-workers, in the hopes that a generation may come along with no need for counter-mothers at all.

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Appendix A

Guiding Research Questions

- Questions for content analysis
 - Are there any specific words frequently used by the contributors' to describe themselves or their life?
 - Is there a notable increase or decrease of specific word usage throughout the time period?
 - What types of identities do the contributors' describe in their notes (such as race, religion, age, occupation, sexual orientation, and disabilities)? Are certain identities more prevalent than others?
 - What places of residence are mentioned by the contributors? How widespread was the *Sinister Wisdom* community?
 - Are there any mentions or discussions of social and political events taking place at the time? If so, what words are used to describe such events?
- Questions for discourse analysis

- What do the “contributors’ notes” suggest about the women’s agency as writers/artists and as women (Smith & Watson, 2010)?
- How is feminism seemingly understood and lived by these women?
- What are the tones of the “contributors’ notes” (Smith & Watson, 2010)? Is there humor, hope, frustration, appreciation, or anger?
- Do the identities the women describe suggest intersectionality? Is intersectionality specifically mentioned? What does this say about the lives and feminist views of these women?
- What other communities are these women a part of? How do these communities potentially connect to *Sinister Wisdom* and why are these communities specifically mentioned?
- “Does writing the life narrative seem to have a therapeutic function?” (Smith & Watson, 2010, pg. 240). What struggles and conflicts, whether internal or external, are these women going through? How does writing about such struggles seemingly impact their ability to cope and move forward?

