

“MAKING OURSELVES REAL”: JEAN AND RUTH MOUNTAINGROVE IN THE
SOUTHERN OREGON LESBIAN-FEMINIST COMMUNITY,
1970 - 1984

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the relationship between 1970s lesbian-feminist theory and praxis through analysis of the cultural production and lived experiences of Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove, two members of a loose-knit community of back-to-the-land lesbian-feminist separatists in southern Oregon. The Mountaingroves published several successful lesbian-feminist publications from the 1970s until the mid-1980s, as well as incorporating lesbian feminism into all aspects of their personal lives, in essence politicizing their whole lives. The interconnection between the Mountaingroves’ personal, public, and professional lives illustrates some of the overarching changes lesbian-feminist theory initiated through the politicization of identity and isolation from men, as well as the boundary-making and contradictions that occurred when lesbian feminists attempted to integrate theory into their personal lives. Through the Mountaingroves’ story we can see the fruitful unifying nature of lesbian-feminist theory and culture and the many paradoxes inherent in the politics of identity on public and private levels.

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For Miriam, the best girlfriend, partner in crime, and copyeditor a gal could ever ask for.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A few years before they met, Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove each began to radically transform their lives (figure 1).¹ Walking away from the comforts their respective middle-class heterosexual lives had provided up to that point, they each divorced their husbands in the late 1960s, choosing to search for fulfillment and a new direction for themselves with the help and insights of the counterculture and the women's movement. Ruth was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1923 and attended Kutztown State College in Pennsylvania where she got a degree in education, with a focus in chemistry, in 1945.² Jean was born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1925, but spent a large portion of her adult life in Los Angeles, California, working as a social worker. Neither woman was exactly the typical counterculture convert, being somewhat older than the hippies one pictures cavorting around in the Summer of Love. Indeed, Jean and Ruth both had responsibilities that made turning on, tuning in, and dropping out a bit complicated. In 1970, when the two women met, they were each emotionally and financially saddled with the demands of raising their children. Ruth had four children, the oldest 21 and the youngest only 8 years old, and Jean had two children, ages 11 and 14;

¹ All images, unless otherwise noted, are presented courtesy of Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon. For these, and other, images see: Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Coll. 309, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries.

² Resume of Ruth Elizabeth Ikeler, Box 64, Folder 10, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

however, neither was looking to recreate the economic security they had abandoned with some new man, as this was not the solution to either woman's problems.³

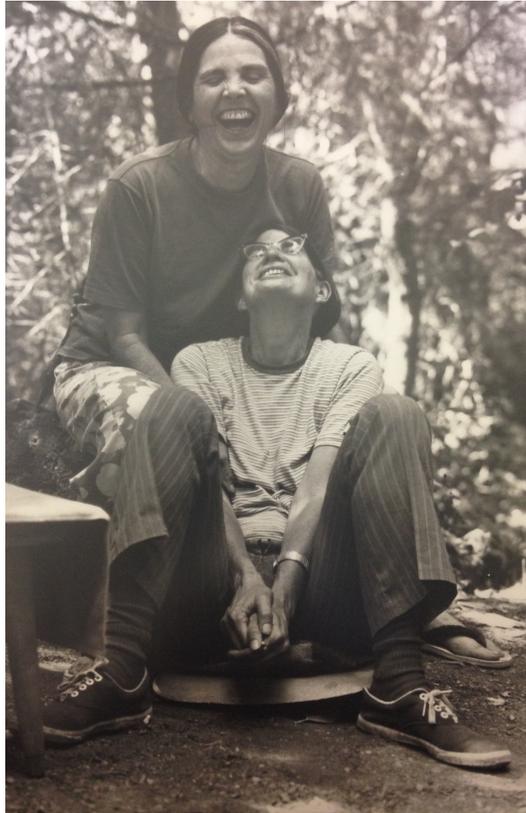


Figure 1. Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove

Jean and Ruth each separately found their new bearings in the movement for women's liberation, engaging with the new and evolving feminisms of the 1970s with a dedication and drive that can truly be described as radical. The sequence of events that led them to abandon their middle-class existence, although perhaps unexpected at the time, in some ways echo a familiar narrative of self-transformation inspired by the women's movement of the 1970s, and the counterculture in general. What is perhaps

³ Catherine B Kleiner, "Doin' It For Themselves: Lesbian Land Communities in southern Oregon, 1970-1995" (University of New Mexico, 2003), 41.; Kim Ikeler to Ruth Mountaingrove, 7 September 1985, Box 3, Folder 25, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

most unique about Jean and Ruth's feminist transformations is the degree to which they incorporated feminism into every aspect of their lives. Both of the Mountaingroves took feminism especially to heart by connecting a desire to extract that they believed the patriarchy had inflicted on them, and women in general, with a new commitment to center their lives and their energies exclusively on women. In late 1970, shortly after they met at a Quaker single parents retreat in Pennsylvania, Jean wrote to Ruth, "I really feel lucky in my women friends. When I think how many hours I have wasted mooning over men and how little it has come to, I have decided to enjoy my women friends more and give these relationships the first place they deserve."⁴ Jean, then, was choosing to make women the center of her relationships, both romantic and otherwise, and she had found a possible compatriot in Ruth.

Their search for fulfillment and freedom eventually, and perhaps surprisingly, led Jean and Ruth to the hills of southern Oregon, where they rebuilt their lives together, forming a partnership that blurred the line between the personal and the professional, and, for that matter, between the personal and the political. They dedicated their lives to producing a new women's culture that had its foundation in separatist —women only— lesbian feminism. Moving to the country allowed them to live in relative isolation from men, freeing the women to reimagine their lives outside of patriarchal domination. The Mountaingroves engaged wholeheartedly in the development of this new "woman-identified" culture on a public level, creating and publishing several successful lesbian-feminist publications over the next ten years, as well as incorporating this new cultural ideology into all aspects of their personal lives. The relationship between the

⁴ "Jean to Ruth," October 1970, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Box 5, Folder 4, Special Collections University of Oregon Knight Library.

Mountaingroves' personal and professional lives illustrates the positive change lesbian-feminist theory hoped to achieve through the politicization of identity and isolation from men. The Mountaingroves' experiences also illustrate the boundary-making that occurred in that process and the transformations and contradictions that occurred when lesbian-feminist theory was integrated into daily lives. Here we can see some of the many paradoxes inherent in the politics of identity on both a public and personal level.

Over 40 years after Jean Mountaingrove moved to southern Oregon, she explained her perspective on separatism through a metaphor, comparing lesbian lands, the rural homesteads where only women were welcomed, to hospitals. From her perspective, the patriarchy inflicted very specific injuries on women, some physical but many psychic, and separatism was the only way some women could recover from those injuries. She added that some people went in with an illness, stayed for a while, were healed, and then left. Others will never recover from the harm of the patriarchy. They need to stay forever.⁵ While Jean had a looser conception of separatism than some other women in her community, perhaps due to the fact that one of her children was male, her analogy gets at an important aspect of lesbian-feminist culture, its therapeutic mission to help with the trauma caused by a patriarchal and homophobic society. Scholar Ann Cvetkovich argues that lesbian culture has transformed therapeutic discourse in order to make an affirming process of healing, and I take this assertion as a jumping off point for thinking about the connection between lesbian-feminist public discourse and personal healing.⁶ Conceptualizing separatism as a project of healing for all women founded on

⁵ Jean Mountaingrove, Interview with the Author, 7 May 2011, Wolf Creek, Oregon.

⁶ See: Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

the premise that all women were wounded and in need of recovery, lesbian-feminist theory produced an important and new model of therapeutic culture. The exclusionary nature of separatism, as the Oregon case illustrates, paradoxically excluded some women from this supposed universal project of women's recovery.

The Southern Oregon Lesbian-Feminist Community

Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove became central figures in a loosely knit community of lesbians living rural lives in southern Oregon beginning in the early 1970s. This southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community, as I will call it, is hard to define. Beginning with just a few women who had answered the parallel calls to go back-to-the-land and to become lesbian feminists, the larger community eventually came to include women living in both communal and privately held rural homesteads along the I5 corridor in southern Oregon, as well as women living in nearby towns, such as Roseburg and Grants Pass; however, the core locations of this community are rural homesteads, many with colorful names, such as Rainbow's End, Womanshare, Fly Away Home, OWL Farm, Cabbage Lane, and Rootworks, where lesbian-identified women led separatist lives.⁷ The southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community was, and is, geographically dispersed, with miles of bumpy dirt back roads between them, and yet at the same time it forms a tight knit supportive community of women to this day.

Most of the women who set up homesteads in southern Oregon came from similar backgrounds. Like Jean and Ruth, they were predominantly white, from urban

⁷ Kleiner, "Doin' It for Themselves," 96.

upbringings and college-educated, but were by no means identical in their personal histories.⁸ Some residents had previously been married and came to lesbianism later in life, as the Mountaingroves had, while a few had never had romantic relationships with men at all. Several had come to separatism from a background in the Gay Liberation Movement, but that was not the usual route to separatism.⁹ Instead, most had ended up in southern Oregon because of their involvement in some aspect of the women's liberation movement.

In addition to having the confidence and initiative to literally build their homes and the infrastructure of their homesteads from the ground up, they created a thriving artistic culture in the woods of southern Oregon that was founded in their belief in the power of a distinctly gendered culture. Women in the community were exceptionally talented artists, exploring feminism and their personal identities through a variety of mediums, from the visual arts to performance. In addition to the cooperative physical work they were doing building and maintaining their homes, interest in writing, art, and music tied these women together culturally. Notably, this community supported a thriving photographic culture and nurtured a significant number of feminist photographers, including Ruth Mountaingrove.

Their desire to eliminate some kinds of personal differences and inequalities, such as disparities in socio-economic backgrounds, contrasted sharply with their celebration of difference in other instances, for example their veneration and exoticization of women of color. Differences both strengthened and weakened the southern Oregon lesbian land

⁸ Barbara Summerhawk and La Verne Gagehabib, *Circles of Power: Shifting Dynamics in a Lesbian-Centered Community* (Norwich, Vt.: New Victoria Publishers, 2000), 52.

⁹ Kleiner, "Doin' It for Themselves," 61.

community. Women from different backgrounds brought to the community a diversity of experience and an array of skills that were beneficial to survival in their new rural homes. Nevertheless, different backgrounds also caused growing pains, and continuing conflict, in this new utopian community. One of the central ideological conflicts within lesbian lands centered on the limits of how a woman was defined. How could the gendered limitations of dominant society be rejected while women continued to rely on ideas about innate female characteristics? In other words, in order to develop a universal sisterhood, one had to first define who a “sister” could be. To imagine a world without the link between sex and gender only went so far – one set of natural connections replaced another. While land-based lesbians rejected stereotypes about women from the outside world, they still searched for the “truth” of femaleness instead of embracing real multiplicity and accepting that women were distributed along the full spectrum of human bodies, emotions, behaviors, and beliefs. The search for the “true-self,” one of the central aims of their feminist project, thus eliminated social construction as a viable route to selfhood and set up a search for a self that intertwined both history and biology. The lesbian community in southern Oregon, while obviously always populated with women who identified as lesbians, relied more heavily on a biological definition of “woman” than on self-identification as a lesbian as the boundary for inclusion in the community. It was on the boundary of womanhood that their community identity was made.

Most of the “landdykes,” as they sometimes referred to themselves, had an active background in feminism and consciousness-raising groups, which meant that they took what they perceived as a critical approach to all community decisions and had a dual focus on the community’s development, as well as their own personal development.

Community decision-making and open communication between women with different life experiences, priorities, and backgrounds led to lengthy and numerous meetings that left some exhausted and frustrated.¹⁰ Group dialog about inequalities, both in the dominant society and in the new one they were creating, brought forth and intensified conflicts between community members in many cases. For example, the women at the Womanshare collective documented numerous conflicts they had over class differences.¹¹ For Jean and Ruth, this was one of the reasons they eventually settled on their own private land, having experienced communal living in the years before the women's community developed. By the mid 1970s they were looking for a country life that would aid their journey toward becoming more actualized feminists, and as the elders of their community they did not necessarily want to be involved in continual conflict.¹² They were not interested in having a completely communal existence, in the way that some others in their broader community were, but they did pursue personal development through dialog with each other and constant interaction with women in the southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community.

Even while the women in the community agreed that they all desired to live woman-identified lives, the term separatism did not have a universal definition nor was there consensus about exactly what it meant in practice. Others, but not all in the community, shared Jean's perspective, that separatism was about personal healing and

¹⁰ Pelican Lee, "Nozoma Tribe" in *Lesbian Land*, ed. Joyce Cheney (Minneapolis, Minn: Word Weavers, 1985), 161.

¹¹ Sue et. all, *Country Lesbians: The Story of the WomanShare Collective* (Grants Pass, OR: WomanShare Books, 1976).

¹² Jean Mountaingrove Interview

could be temporary. As historian Catherine Kleiner described, “For lesbian feminists, separatism meant severing ties to men and to male-controlled culture... Some thought separatism was a viable but only temporary strategy. But for the most radical of lesbian-feminists, separatism was a permanent way of life – the ultimate and only politically acceptable way.”¹³ This difference in ideology, between levels of dedication to separatism, seems to have been uniformly respected, with women acknowledging that there was no general answer for all women. The stronger version of separatism—as a permanent way of life—did, however, come to form the way their community’s ideology was understood from the outside looking in.

The southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community was fueled by a politically based lesbianism, or lesbian-feminism.¹⁴ This was a homosexuality that did not have its perceived roots in biology, as is the dominant “explanation” for homosexuality today. Instead, it was homosexuality by choice. This was a political choice that expressed one’s opposition to the system of patriarchy through solidarity with women; thus to live one’s principles should include a romantic connection to women only. In general, women in the community were not looking for formal equality within the existing patriarchal political and economic structures but for true autonomy from men in labor, culture, and their personal lives. For the women joining lesbian intentional communities, autonomy could only come to fruition through the creation of a unique and separate female existence and culture.

¹³ Kleiner, “Doin’ It for Themselves,” 3.

¹⁴ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 211- 241.

Some of the members of the southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community had spent time in predominately heterosexual intentional communities before coming to separatism. For example, Jean and Ruth did not move to a separatist community initially but into a straight religious intentional community, called Mountain Grove, which was located outside of Wolf Creek, Oregon. After living there for several years, Jean and Ruth came into conflict with the men who ran the community, when both Jean and Ruth's woman-identified politics and their environmental ethics differed from the men's vision for the community.¹⁵ Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove had left the city to find a connection to nature and the freedom to explore their identities, but even in an intentional community they were not free from various forms of oppression. From Mountaingrove they traveled around the West Coast for a year, trying to find lesbians and land that they wanted to live on. Eventually they moved into a communal situation on land owned by a gay man, Carl Wittman. They stayed on Carl's land, Golden, for five years. In 1978, when a friend informed them that there was a good piece of land for sale in Sunny Valley, already named Rootworks, they bought it.¹⁶

Historiography

Although the high point of cultural production and population was in the early 1980s, the southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community sits at the intersection of a variety of social movements that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. They were back-to-

¹⁵ "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984)," n.d., 9 July 1973, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Box 9, Special Collections University of Oregon Knight Library.

¹⁶ Joyce Cheney. *Lesbian Land* (Minneapolis, Minn: Word Weavers, 1985), 125.

the-landers, in fact some of the longest lasting intentional communities that sprung from the counterculture. Their building practices and spirituality reflect an early environmental ethic, being among an early generation of devout environmentalists. Most formatively, they were cultural lesbian-feminists, restructuring their lives around understandings they had gained in the women's movement about the social and institutional inequality that women faced in the patriarchal society.

This women's land movement, while so grounded in feminism, was heavily connected to the back-to-the-land movement that began in the 1960's, and thus the long history of American utopian movements in general.¹⁷ At its core, the back-to-the-land movement set out to disconnect from urban life and connect more deeply with the natural world. Centered on a deep environmental ethic, going back to the land was a social response to the urban decay and suburban sprawl of the 1950's, the impersonal nature of the expanding industrial world, and the degradation of the natural world through extensive resource extraction and exploitation. While scholars of intentional communities such as Timothy Miller and James Kopp have acknowledged the existence of women's separatist communities, these communities have in general been treated as an interesting side note to the largely male and heterosexual narrative of back-to-the-land. When lesbian feminists are included in back-to-the-land narratives, their gender critique becomes an important part of the radical narrative of back-to-the-land, both in these communities and in the way that a progressive gender system was resisted in other communities. Historians such as Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo have highlighted the strikingly conventional gendered system in many straight back-to-the-land communities,

¹⁷ Timothy Miller, *The 60's Communes: Hippies and Beyond* (Syracuse University Press, 1999); James J Kopp, *Eden within Eden: Oregon's Utopian Heritage* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2009).

arguing that “hippy women” were actually enacting many of the gendered labor roles that their grandmothers, not their mothers, had performed before them. The women of southern Oregon’s lesbian community ran counter to this, however, as they were actively engaged in toppling a variety of traditional gender roles and ideals.¹⁸ Although they still had to do all the traditionally female labor that Lemke-Santangelo’s “hippy women” did, due to their homosocial environment, the women in the southern Oregon community found a great deal more joy and satisfaction in constructing buildings and working on cars, labor that was non-traditional for women.

The lesbian-feminist back-to-the-land project was grounded in a highly gendered belief that women had an innate connection to each other and to the natural world. This understanding had its roots in what has been called cultural feminism, a distinct ideological strain of feminism that historian Alice Echols famously positioned as an offshoot of radical feminism.¹⁹ Cultural feminists have been defined based on their distinctive strategy for ending sexist exploitation and oppression, which differed from previous radical feminist solutions. Cultural feminists worked to create a separate women’s culture, established with an understanding that by foregrounding all women’s similarity through a so-called universal sisterhood they could affect a larger revolution through cultural change. Instead of attempting to change larger systems of power through direct action, cultural feminists sought to create a new culture that could be the foundation for an alternative order and a new world. Believing in a category of women that had biological parameters, cultural feminism imagined that all women shared the

¹⁸ Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Daughters of Aquarius: Women of the Sixties Counterculture* (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

¹⁹ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 5.

same basic desires, needs, and concerns due to their social position and biology as women. They attempted to create a universal sisterhood across other lines of difference, such as race and class, under the assumption that being a woman was the single most defining aspect of all women's identity. Lesbian feminists such as the Radicalesbians, themselves walking the line between radical and cultural feminisms, took this one step further. In addition to famously stating in 1970 that, "A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion," they argued in *Woman Identified Woman* that in order to overthrow the patriarchy women's interpersonal and intimate relationships should only be with women as well.²⁰

One commonality that ties together cultural feminist strains, is that they were all building separatist institutions and communities, some examples of which include women's groups, women's music festivals, women's businesses, and women's intentional communities. In her writing on separatism, Dana Shugar highlights the unique ability separatism had in creating community among women. Placing it as a natural outgrowth of radical feminist theory, Shugar argued that separatism, "created concepts of the universality of women's oppression and encouraged the practice of female community as one response to that oppression."²¹ While she mentions some of the troubling aspects of separatism, including, "essentialism, naiveté, and probable political ineffectiveness," Shugar insists that despite widespread feminist critique of

²⁰ Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman," in *Notes from the Third Year: Women's Liberation*, ed. Anne Koedt, Anita Rapone, and Ellen Levine (New York: New York Radical Feminist, 1971), 81–87.

²¹ Dana R Shugar, *Separatism and Women's Community* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 180.

lesbian separatism, during the 1990s many women continued to be drawn to separatist spaces and separatist texts such as Sally Gearhart's *Wanderground*.²²

Despite the underlying belief in innate female characteristics that is so connected to cultural feminism, lesbian feminists in southern Oregon were engaged in a variety of practices that aligned them with what have been defined as cultural, radical, and liberal feminisms. For example, in spite of their separatism, lesbian-feminists in southern Oregon walked a middle ground between liberal and radical feminist ideologies. They thought that women were a special separate category from men but they also wanted access to men's knowledge and their jobs – believing that they were perfectly suited to masculinized labor as well. Sexual difference should be irrelevant to the labor one performs, they believed, and they sought opportunities to acquire the skills and training that had been in large part the domain of men. Their actions and ideology thus may blur the hard lines that historians have tended to draw between “difference” and “equality” feminisms in order to document the larger movement.²³ Lesbian feminists in southern Oregon occupied both traditions simultaneously, insisting that women were inherently different but fully equal to men in their abilities at the same time.

The desire for a cultural definition and identification as women was not unique to lesbian-feminist homosexual communities. Arlene Stein's *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* delves into defining the broader lesbian-feminist community,

²² Sally Miller Gearhart, *The Wanderground* (Watertown, Massachusetts: Persephone Press, 1979).

²³ For foundational scholarship on the problems of an “equality” vs. “difference” model see: Joan W. Scott, “Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (April 1, 1988): 33–50.

which pursued a unified culture as well.²⁴ At its core, Stein was interested in the ambiguities that are inherent in the formation of sexual identity between the 1970s and the 1990s. While some may consider “coming out” as a process of expressing some innate, long buried, true essence, Stein complicates this narrative by documenting the ways in which becoming a lesbian is also a process of learning new cultural norms and mores. She states, “one is not born a lesbian; one becomes a lesbian through acts of reflexive self-fashioning. The formation of a lesbian identity is at least partly a matter of developing proficiency in manipulating codes and symbols.”²⁵ Overall, Stein’s work is “the story of how individuals banded together to challenge dominant definition and to collectively redefine sexual identities, and how they in turn were shaped by those politicized concepts and over time modified them.”²⁶ The women at the foundation of the southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community are thus a strong example of this type of collectivity.

In juxtaposing 1970s lesbian feminist identity and 1990s lesbian identity, Stein’s work gives insight into the structural weaknesses of lesbian-feminist cultural feminism. She highlights the ways in which the core ideologies of lesbian feminism, specifically a theoretical belief in universal female attributes and the ability of any woman to be a lesbian, created both internal and social conflict among those that identified as lesbian feminists. Stein states, “By externalizing difference and developing a gender separatism that policed the boundaries around the lesbian group, lesbian feminists came to reinforce

²⁴ Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

the differences ... that they had originally sought to erase.”²⁷ Even though they were able to imagine the ability of any woman to be a lesbian, “they failed to escape dominant conceptions that saw sexuality in binary terms... thus neglecting the diversity with each category and the variability of the boundaries separating them.”²⁸ According to Stein, boundary making both solidified separatist communities and prevented their messages from having broader appeal. This is certainly the case in the southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community.

Even though the community in southern Oregon had distinct boundaries that separated it from broad-based coalition work, such as the gay liberation movement, the community should be included in historical discussions of the evolution of homosexual identity in the United States during the end of the twentieth century. Blurring yet another hard and fast boundary, some lesbian-feminists in the southern Oregon community have simultaneously asserted both a politically chosen lesbian political identity and an inborn sexual preference for other women, while others have asserted only one or the other. Largely coming to lesbianism through their commitment to live woman-identified lives, their political identity as lesbians and personal narratives of inborn homosexual preference have blurred the line between contemporary “born this way” rhetoric and the possibilities of homosexuality as a freely chosen intimate solution to the problem of male domination. Throughout this work I will predominantly refer to their political sexual identity, a sexual identity that was consciously chosen due to political convictions, because that was the prevailing narrative among my subjects; however, whether they

²⁷ Ibid., 197.

²⁸ Ibid.

understood their sexual orientation to be freely chosen or inborn did not seem to be either a contradiction or a point of conflict for women in this community.²⁹ Either path, or a combined path, to lesbianism was viable. That a certain type of lesbian identity was created was the outcome that mattered most.

This community also complicates another dominant narrative in LGBT history, the necessity of queer migration from rural life to the safety and community of urban life. While this was certainly a central and formative aspect of queer identity and community formation in the 20th century, it is not the entire story.³⁰ Instead, some lesbian-feminists, and some gay men, moved in an opposite direction, finding security and community in relative rural isolation.³¹ The lesbian lands in southern Oregon were not the only of their kind, with a variety of separatist spaces sprouting up all across the country in the 1970s.³² While rural queer life did include some fears—one can imagine fearing that strangers

²⁹ For a variety of narratives of women in southern Oregon coming to lesbianism see: Kleiner, “Doin’ It for Themselves,” 29, ; Heather Burmeister, “Rural Revolution: Documenting the Lesbian Land Communities of southern Oregon,” 2013, 28.

³⁰ Important and foundational histories of LGBT urban life include: John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities : The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); George Chauncey, *Gay New York : Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town : A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline D Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold : The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Allan Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire* (New York: The Free Press, Simon & Schuster, 1990); Martin B Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Dutton, 1993); Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves : Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

³¹ For an interesting look at homosexual relationships between men in the hinterlands of the Pacific Northwest during the Progressive era see: Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs : Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

³² For a few examples see: Joyce Cheney, ed., *Lesbian Land* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Word Weavers, 1985); Gill Valentine, “Making Space: Lesbian Separatist Communities in the United States,” in *Contested Countryside Cultures: Rurality and Socio-Cultural Marginalisation*, ed. Paul Cloke and Jo Little (New York: Routledge, 1997), 109–122; Jessica Louise Lynn, “Country Women: Back-to-the-Land Feminism and Radical Feminist Praxis in the Women’s Liberation Movement” (southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2013).

could come onto their lands to enact homophobic violence—the country gave lesbian-feminists space away from the priorities of the larger society, namely, away from the patriarchy of the cities, which many saw as doing violence to them on both a physical and psychological level. This contrasts with the dominant narrative of the queer urban oasis. Adopting what Scott Herring has called a “critical rusticity”, rural lesbians, “conceptualized [themselves] as a counter to supposedly ‘man-made cities’ and all the aesthetic, socioeconomic, and narrative trappings that these environments were ideologically thought to entail for women, lesbian or not.”³³ These rural women objected to many of the priorities of queer urban life, for instance bar culture or the habitus of urban lesbians, focusing instead on creating their own homosexual culture with its own mores. They worked to publicize their own cultural values and political perspectives, grounded in their connection to rural life, through publications and interpersonal networks that communicated their alternative vision of identity back to queer urban communities.

In spite of a relative lack of historical interest in rural LGBT subjects, scholarship on this community can illustrate a variety of important historical threads. The few historians who have focused on this community have understandably concerned themselves first and foremost with documenting the broad boundaries of the community; few in-depth studies of these women’s lives or their culture exist. The first major project on the southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community was Catherine Kleiner’s “Doin It For Themselves: Lesbian Land Communities in southern Oregon, 1970 – 1995”.³⁴

³³ Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 81.

³⁴ Kleiner, “Doin’ It for Themselves.”

Completed as a dissertation in 2003, Kleiner's research set out to describe the place and the women who moved to rural southern Oregon in the early 1970s. Kleiner's work does include one chapter of analysis, which focuses on the "erotics" of lesbian land. In addition, several theses have taken similar scholarly tactics, looking at the broad characteristics that define the community through the experiences of the women who populated this community and filling in gaps of knowledge around specific figures in the community. When studying a community that included so many exceptional figures, just excavating their names and personal histories has been an important ongoing process.

The scholarly works on this southern Oregon community have mainly used oral histories as their foundational sources. Oral histories became central to the conception and production of the new field of LGBT History when it began in the 1970s and their use has been interwoven with what historian Nan Alamilla Boyd has called the "overtly political function and a liberating quality" of queer history.³⁵ While it is central to the social justice foundations of LGBT history that underrepresented populations are given historical voice, oral histories also fulfill a much simpler, yet key, function of creating histories, which is that they are essential to filling in gaps in knowledge. This is especially essential in the case of LGBT history, where the subjects may have been reticent to write about their homosexual behaviors. For example, early in his research for *Gay New York*, George Chauncey found that "oral histories would be the single most important source of evidence concerning the internal workings of the gay world."³⁶

Through oral history interviews, the LGBT past, for instance, becomes a narrative not

³⁵ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Bodies of evidence : the practice of queer oral history*, ed. Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N Roque Ramírez (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³⁶ Chauncey, *Gay New York*.

just of persecution, which may be documented by oppressive regimes, but of community building and agency in the face of oppression, important experiences that may not be visible in the documentary record.

The importance of oral histories as primary sources does not negate the fact that using oral histories has limitations and disadvantages, and that LGBT historians have varied opinions on how much trust they should have in their accuracy in general. While working on his biography of gay civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, John D’Emilio made specific decisions about who to interview based on the political climate at the time he was doing research. When debating whether to create new oral histories of civil rights leaders who had previously been interviewed, D’Emilio recalled that, “I was not interested in conducting a third round of interviews in which participants, in the more gay-tolerant atmosphere of the mid- to late 1990s, revised their views of Rustin as an activist and a homosexual.”³⁷ The time and distance from an event or a person can change our perceptions drastically. This is equally important to remember when attempting to document the lesbian community in southern Oregon, as it was for D’Emilio and civil rights workers. The women involved in this community are justifiably invested in how they are perceived historically and our current era may have changed their perceptions, even unbeknownst to them. The passage of time has also probably altered the assessments of observers, not only participants; however, historians Kennedy and Davis also address the inherent problems involved with using oral histories as primary sources, but they have a different perspective. They respond to criticism of its use as “a moot question - while other kinds of primary sources do not bring up issues of

³⁷ D’Emilio, *Bodies of Evidence*.

the distortion of memory, they do bring up issues of “the limited representation of community participants' own views, or the lack of multiple perspectives.”³⁸

In this work, I treat evidence from oral histories as seriously as I do documentary evidence; however, just like documents, I have attempted to remember that oral histories require analysis and interpretation. In other words, they cannot necessarily be taken at face value but instead need to be integrated and contextualized with other source material whenever possible in order to create a nuanced and reliable history. The foundational scholarship on southern Oregon women’s lands, which stemmed from the memories of those involved in the community, now needs to be supported, and perhaps complicated, by a closer look at the documents that were produced in the community in the 1970s and 1980s. In these documents ideology and lived experience collide. They offer access to what that place and time were like and connect the southern Oregon community’s ideology to larger discourses in the women’s movement and feminist theory.

Many of the women living in the community had the foresight to collect important sources that document their radical project. Due to this foresight a wide variety of documentary sources are available to researchers, ranging from financial papers to diaries to photographs to published materials. Historians, thus, have an ample amount of documentary sources with which to explore the community’s history precisely because of the efforts these women made in preserving their own history. In some ways this project is the culmination of two historical projects interacting with one another, my project and theirs. Their documents, supplemented by information from oral histories conducted by other historians, have been my rich and useful source base.

³⁸ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 23.

Overview

My work attempts to blend analysis of the theoretical and cultural work of lesbian-feminists and their lived experiences. I have taken historian Lauri Umansky's questions about the relationship between feminist theory and realities to heart:

Only as social historians undertake the meticulous work of identifying specific groups of feminists and tracing the theoretical positions they pursued will it become possible to address the further thorny problem facing students of women's liberation: the relation of theory and praxis. Should we stress the overt acts undertaken by feminists ... If so, then in what light should we regard the vast body of theory that feminists have produced? To what extent are these two aspects of feminist expression separate, and to what extent do they inform one another?³⁹

In order to delve into these questions, this work focuses on both the public and private lives of Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove, two key founding members of the larger community. The southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community was built and maintained by a large number of women, many of whom made indelible contributions that are clearly deserving of historical documentation, but the Mountaingroves' story is the best vehicle for allowing me to illustrate the intimate connection between theory and practice.

The first chapter looks at *WomanSpirit Magazine*, the first and longest running publication produced by Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove. *WomanSpirit*, the brainchild of Jean Mountaingrove, reveals the intimate connection between lesbian-feminist's political identities and the spiritual practices they developed. A cultural project that its makers understood to have larger political implications, I argue that *WomanSpirit* illustrates how lesbian-feminist discourses successfully integrated the feminist model of consciousness-

³⁹ Lauri Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 8.

raising into a variety of cultural projects, making the personal realm of spirituality into a truly political space. They effectively incorporated feminist political and theoretical developments, specifically a faith in the truth of personal experience, into their understandings of spirituality; however, these discourses were ultimately limited by the nature of the politics of identity, a perspective that relied on a restrictive understanding of what constituted a woman, effectively positioning the physical bodies of women at the core of their spirituality. Throughout this chapter the personal history of Jean Mountaingrove is highlighted in an attempt to connect the larger discourses produced by the magazine to the transformative impact feminist spirituality had on individual women, in this case the impact it had on one of the women involved in actually producing the discourse.

The second chapter focuses on the importance of feminist photography in the southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community, specifically concentrating on the feminist photography camp the Mountaingroves ran at their home and the feminist photography magazine they published, called *The Blatant Image*. Through these projects, and the impact feminist photography had on the individual life of Ruth Mountaingrove, we can see the important role art played in the feminist project of self-actualization, being both a means of self expression and a vehicle for changing public perceptions of women. Feminist photographers in southern Oregon attempted to expand the variety of women captured in photographs in an attempt to make art reflect the true variety of women in the world. This was a powerful feminist political message, one at the heart of much feminist art, which once again put women's bodies at the center of the larger feminist project of change. While Ruth Mountaingrove's personal photography was rooted in her personal

feminist transformation, a transformation that itself ran up against the limits of incorporating theory into personal reality, the camp she developed and the magazine she published were vehicles for relaying broader feminist ideals to women outside of southern Oregon.

The third chapter takes a close look at the Mountaingroves' personal relationship to each other and how they attempted to make their life together match their political viewpoint in a variety of ways. To explore this theme, I rely heavily on Ruth Mountaingrove's personal diaries, a source that highlights the reciprocal nature of feminist theory making, with the conversation about feminism going continually back and forth between personal experience and theoretical understandings and between the individual and other feminists. Though personal experience formed the basis of feminist theory, Ruth's more private insights highlight the difficulties of putting theory based on someone else's experience into practice. The Mountaingroves, who were so interested in developing public discussions about feminism in the model of consciousness-raising, were also attempting to integrate the insights they had gained into all aspects of their personal lives, a project of praxis. Here I argue that when the Mountaingroves attempted to apply lesbian-feminist theory to all aspects of their personal lives they experienced frustrations and failures as well as successes, as theory did not always translate smoothly into practice, particularly in regard to the Mountaingrove's sexual partnership, their relationships with their children, and the men connected to their lives.

The conclusion reflects on what lesbian feminism and this community of women in southern Oregon meant to the lives of Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove and the impact that Jean and Ruth had in return. This was a truly reciprocal relationship of give and

take. Jean and Ruth's work connected larger lesbian-feminist ideology to aspects of individual lives usually deemed apolitical, opening a variety of spaces for women to engage with feminism and explore ways to build a new culture and community that eliminated sexist oppression and discrimination. This project was imagined and executed as a project of healing for individual women and women as a whole, a unique blurring between the self and society. Additionally, in a discussion about the implications for the Mountaingroves' life work in the current era, I return to the theoretical work of Ann Cvetkovich, this time thinking about the ways the Mountaingrove's publications live on as an important archive of queer possibility from the past and into the future. The Mountaingrove's hoped that their work would continue to be part of an ongoing feminist discourse, and I will explore one, perhaps unexpected, way that it has.

CHAPTER II

JEAN MOUNTAINGROVE AND FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

After ten years of quarterly production, *WomanSpirit Magazine* published its final issue in the summer of 1984 (figure 2). Its final printed words, suggesting not an end but an unending influence, were, “WomanSpirit Lives in the Lives of all women [*sic*]”.¹ The magazine never had a big budget or glossy pages, never sold any ad space, and never sold millions of copies. Yet it made an important and formative impact on the community of women who produced it, and it articulated a spiritual dimension of women’s liberation and lesbianism for hundreds of contributors and readers across the country. A centerpiece of southern Oregon lesbian land cultural production, the magazine’s years of publication reflect the highpoint of activity and numbers in the loosely knit network of lesbian separatist intentional communities that flourished across southern Oregon at their peak in the early 1980’s.

WomanSpirit Magazine started as the brainchild of Jean Mountaingrove. After working on the spirituality issue of another feminist magazine, *Country Women*, Jean thought that she and Ruth should start a magazine dedicated solely to spirituality.² The magazine they eventually developed presented an astounding array of content all dedicated to developing feminist spirituality. Any given page could feature the work of a number of women, with songs, essays, poems, book reviews, and rituals, for instance, sharing a page with drawings and photographs created by other women. An essay that

¹ Editors, “WomanSpirit Lives in the Lives of All Women,” *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Summer 1984, 65.

² WomanSpirit Collective, “Who We Are...,” *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Fall 1974, 63.

was several pages long could easily be followed by a poem only a few lines long, each piece an integral part of the overall whole. While much of the content was typed, titles and supplementary information or captions were often written by hand, in flowing calligraphy that emphasized the handmade nature to the publication. In modern parlance, the *WomanSpirit* collective created a beautiful and professional zine, cutting and pasting the work of contributors, and sometimes appropriating the work of more well-known authors, in order to create a magazine that reflected the spiritual development of the very women who then read it.

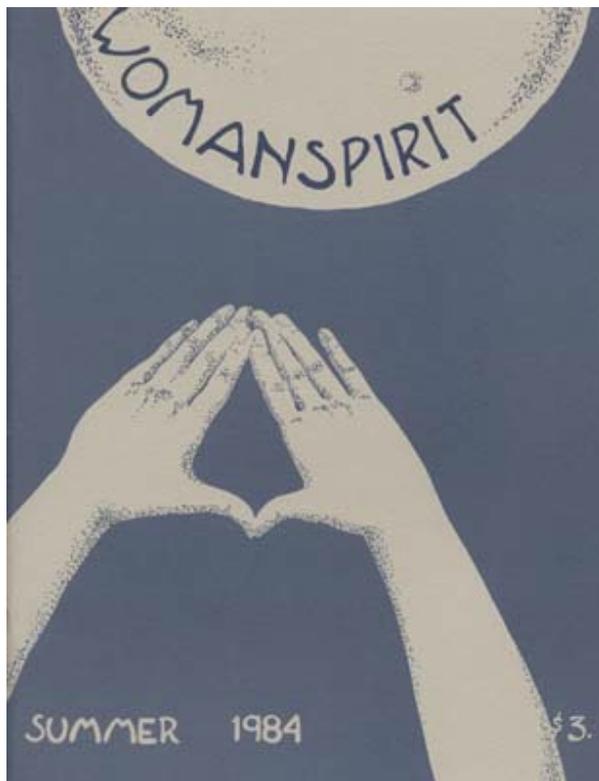


Figure 2. *WomanSpirit Magazine* cover.

Jean began to see an intimate connection between her interest in the women's movement and her spiritual connection to nature in the early 1970s. She also felt that her

desire to develop feminist spirituality would be of interest to other women engaged in women's liberation. Ruth Mountaingrove wrote in her journal in March of 1974, "Jean's latest project is a quarterly for women interested in the spiritual aspect of the women's revolution ... there is a great deal of interest in this area and women need a meeting place where all aspects no matter how strange can be discussed."³ While Jean was by no means the first to come up with the idea that women should have their own spiritual traditions, she did understand that there was an opportunity in 1974 for a more public discussion of what that might look like and entail.⁴

The spiritual traditions the Mountaingroves were developing were part of a larger movement toward feminist spirituality and religion in the 1970s and 1980s. Feminists questioned whether they benefited from male-centered religious traditions, connecting patriarchal religion to inequities in all levels of society. Well-known feminist spiritualists connected New Age spirituality with feminist understandings of women's unequal position in society. The most well known proponents of women's spirituality included Mary Daly, Charlene Spretnak, Margot Adler, Merlin Stone, and Starhawk.⁵ Spretnak's *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* made a clear connection between women's inequality and spirituality: "The lies about the nature of women that are intrinsic to

³ "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1974-1980)," n.d., Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Box 10, Special Collections University of Oregon Knight Library.

⁴ Kleiner, "Doin' It for Themselves," 44. Kleiner discusses the establishment of a variety of women's spiritual traditions at women's festivals across the country, including the Country Women's Festival in northern California in 1972, which Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove attended.

⁵ See: Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Charlene Spretnak, ed., *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1982); Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, first edition (New York: Viking Adult, 1979); Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Mariner Books, 1978); Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981).

patriarchal religion have informed the legal, educational, political, economic, and medical/psychiatric systems of our society and are accepted as ‘natural truths’ by even the most modern and/or atheistic citizens.”⁶ Here religious male chauvinism was exposed as not just a matter of inequality in ones church or religion but as connected to more expansive systems that cultivated inequality. Thus, reforming religion was of real political importance to some feminists, including Jean Mountaingrove.

Rejecting arguments that male supremacy in religious tradition was just “natural”, feminists in the twentieth century reimagined religion in a variety of ways, from subtle and individual reform movements within existing churches to the wholesale rejection of western religious tradition. In many cases they rejected the more rigid term “religion” in exchange for a more palatable and open term “spirituality”. When writing about the evolution of feminist spirituality Gayle Graham Yates defined spirituality as “most easily understood as the core of the person, the center from which meaning, self, and life understanding are generated.”⁷ Their distinction between the terms religion and spirituality in many cases relied on the way feminists gendered the terms, with spirituality expressing a uniquely feminine aspect to their project. The most extreme proponents of a new women’s spiritual religion advocated for a complete separation from men and male-centered religious traditions. The strongest example of this viewpoint is Mary Daly, an outspoken lesbian-feminist theologian. Daly famously wrote in her 1968 book, *The Church and the Second Sex*, that “a woman’s asking for equality in the church

⁶ Spretnak, *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement*, xi.

⁷ Gayle Graham Yates, “Spirituality and the American Feminist Experience,” *Signs* 9, no. 1 (October 1, 1983): 60.

would be comparable to a black person's demanding equality in the Ku Klux Klan."⁸

Although relying on an unfortunate and over simplistic parallel between the social location of women and African Americans, Daly's central point was that she saw religious traditions that had been grounded in male supremacy as irredeemable and thus advocated separatism for women and their religious traditions.

Religious scholar Cynthia Eller has argued, however, that what distinguished feminist spirituality from the political trajectory of feminism in general was its focus on environmentalism. A forerunner to ecofeminism, feminist spiritualists believed that, "the fate of the earth and the fate of women are intimately bound up with one another."⁹ What makes the spirituality in *WomanSpirit* different from the feminist spirituality that Eller outlines is that while the women who Eller interviewed placed "ecology" first on their political agenda, the discourse in *WomanSpirit* was grounded in a discussion of the relationship between feminist politics and earth-based spirituality.¹⁰ Feminism was never of secondary importance in the spiritual purpose of the magazine.

Jean Mountaingrove's own experience with organized religion, specifically Quakerism, was an important foundation for the spiritual work she did throughout her life. Because the Quaker religion has had a history of particularly progressive beliefs around issues of race and sex equality, Jean did not reject it as a whole but instead used it

⁸ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 6.

⁹ Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 192.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

as a springboard in her own spiritual development.¹¹ As recent as 2009 Jean still believed in many of the principles of the church, particularly its emphasis on peaceful nonviolence, but Jean's spiritual connection to nature, her political lesbianism, and her rural isolation made a sustained connection to the church impossible over the years.¹² Instead, with a desire for women's community and a lifelong connection to religion, Jean wanted to effect a spiritual consciousness-raising, which could connect women like her, living in rural isolation, with what Jean saw as the spiritual dimensions of the broader women's movement.¹³

While the women's community Jean Mountaingrove was directly engaged with was geographically isolated, it had a large voice in the articulation of separatist lesbian ideology in general, defining, among many other things, what the editors believed the boundaries of lesbian identity were. By following the transitions within *WomanSpirit's* ten years of publication, we can see the larger transition of lesbian feminism, from a project with broad political intentions and implications into a project focused primarily on individual transformation. This personal political project, what the *WomanSpirit* collective would have categorized as spiritual, relied heavily on their understandings of the categories of lesbian and woman, specifically placing the female physical body both at the center of their identity and at the center of their utopian vision of a universal

¹¹ For a thorough overview of the Quaker religion's history in the US see: Thomas D. Hamm, *The Quakers in America* (Columbia University Press, 2003). For an assorted look at the history of women in various US religions see: Catherine A. Brekus, ed., *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2007). Of particular relevance to this thesis is the chapter by historian Ann Braude titled, "Faith, Feminism, and History." In it Braude argues that religion was central to the development of 20th century feminism, in particular to the beginnings of the National Organization for Women.

¹² Heather Burmeister, "Women's Lands in southern Oregon: Jean Mountaingrove and Bethroot Gwynn Tell Their Stories," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 115, no. 1 (April 1, 2014): 80.

¹³ Burmeister, "Rural Revolution," 73.

sisterhood. The spiritual ideology developed in *WomanSpirit* and its transition from a larger revolutionary political project to a more personal political project elucidates one factor in the contemporary divide between separatist lesbian-feminist ideology and modern feminist and queer conceptions of identity.

Spirituality was central to the creation of a separate women's culture on lesbian lands. Emphasizing the spiritual realm was a fruitful unifying cultural project for lesbian feminists who sought to present a natural oneness among all women. Exploring the intersections of lesbian feminism and spirituality, *WomanSpirit* was instrumental in articulating the conceptual and everyday boundaries of their newly forming spiritual tradition. Creating new traditions and truths out of personal experience, the pieces contributed to the magazine reflect the uniquely feminist emphasis on personal experience as the foundation for new theoretical understandings. While feminists working on social issues, such as pay inequity for instance, used personal experience to cast light on the truth of structural inequality, so too did the feminists that contributed to *WomanSpirit* use their personal experience to make arguments about truth, in this case they used their experiences in the spiritual realm to argue that women truly possessed an important connection to the divine.

WomanSpirit Magazine shows the theoretical development of land-based lesbian spirituality in the 1970s and 1980s, the highly gendered worldview of these women, as well as some of the key tensions within a group of women attempting to promote a universal vision of female spirituality while simultaneously creating boundaries that included some and excluded others. *WomanSpirit* was a project that utilized both cultural appropriation and historical reimagining in order to create a collective female-centered

historical foundation. The spiritual traditions they created relied on the fluidity of some elements of gender juxtaposed against the rigidity of biological definitions of the category of woman. The magazine shows how land-based lesbians battled with the contradictions and paradoxes of identity. Their attempts to formulate a universal sisterhood reveal both the conflicts inherent in identity politics and the articulation of those limits by women who have typically been perceived as being completely oblivious to them.

This conflict between living one's principles and the realities of exclusion and inclusion did not begin with lesbian-feminist communities but can be traced to earlier movements rooted in the politics of identity. In Alice Echols' *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967 – 1975*, the author presents a picture of the complexities that were central to the Women's Liberation Movement in the 60s and 70s, including the central struggle between a unifying identity and the differences so central to women's actual lives. Echols' work illustrates the rise and fall of radical feminism, attributing the demise of radical feminism to a variety of factors, among them was the option of a separate women's culture, which allowed women to remain feminists but enabled them to abandon the practical political battles that had previously created much strife, shifting away from discussions of the different needs and social positions among women for example. According to Echols, the radical feminist movement of the early 1970s fell by the wayside while cultural and liberal feminism commanded growing numbers, the latter of which becoming the main form of feminist activism by the mid 1970s.¹⁴ The unique ideologies of cultural and lesbian feminisms, and their emphasis on so-called innate

¹⁴ Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 5.

female characteristics, resulted directly from the long struggle within radical feminism with difference between women, including the gay-straight split at the beginning of the 1970s. With their emphasis on inherent female characteristics, lesbian-feminists and cultural feminists in the 1970s defined the most important oppression they faced as one based on sex. They also reframed their struggle from one against male supremacy to one against men and the dominant male culture.

While Echols' general narrative of the rise and fall of radical feminism has been widely accepted, her characterization of lesbian feminists and cultural feminists as apolitical has met with some resistance. Specifically, Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp address Echols' assertions about cultural and lesbian feminisms head on in their article, "Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism".¹⁵ In this article Taylor and Rupp argue that lesbian-feminist communities have in fact been central to the continued resilience of radical feminism and that characterizing of them as apolitical ignores their centrality in the broader women's community and movement. At the core of Taylor and Rupp's argument is a desire to reframe the definition of "political" in order to include the broader communities that are required in supporting and sustaining radical politics. In this larger frame, their vision of feminist activism is enlarged but the specificity that defined radical feminism, as opposed to other versions such as liberal feminism, is lost. While land-based lesbian feminists were certainly radical, their radicalism was very different from that of the radical feminists in groups such as the Redstockings or Cell 16. Where Echols attempted to

¹⁵ Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, "Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism," *Signs* 19, no. 1 (October 1, 1993): 34.

differentiate various strains of feminism in order to create a history with more nuance, Taylor and Rupp pursued inclusiveness under the banner of radical feminism.

Articulating the gendered oppression of women and the importance and validity of lesbian sexual identity was not a clear-cut evolution of theory or practice. Instead, women who imagined changing the social and political order employed a variety of tactics to create change, and they were not always able to rectify incongruities between their politics and their personal feelings and actions. A combination of public and private changes were involved in the formation of feminist ideology and sexual identity.

Lesbian-feminists, including land lesbians, during the 1970s and 1980s drew on radical and cultural feminist ideology to articulate their political and personal belief in the importance of women's culture. With their culture founded on a political movement, lesbian feminists grappled with the contradictions inherent in matching personal identity with political beliefs. Efforts to inject universal conceptions about women into lesbian feminist ideology, identity, culture, and politics, including into spirituality, therefore have twin roots. First, they originate in early radical feminist efforts to articulate the nature of male supremacy and their tactics in attacking it. Second, they originate in 1970s understandings of the connection between politics and sexual identity formation.

The conflict around the degree to which lesbian feminists were and are radical political actors is reflected in the spiritual work of land-based lesbians in southern Oregon, specifically through *WomanSpirit Magazine*. The majority of women who lived on lesbian-separatist lands believed they were involved in a highly political movement, whether or not those outside would agree and whether or not their definition of "political" would align with any sort of dominant definition; however, the politics of southern

Oregon separatism did not always align with the larger public projects of radical feminism, such as fighting for reproductive rights, as their vision of the political centered on the transformative potential of women's culture, not intervention in the larger social or governmental political structures.

In the first issue of *WomanSpirit Magazine* the political was clearly present, as was its tie to both the personal and spiritual. The editors stated, "When we realize the political implications of all our struggles, we know that patriarchy cannot withstand our changes... As we continue to tear down the institutions and relationships that oppress us, we are also building, making, creating. Because this process of taking and leaving, making a new culture, is so deep, profound, and all-inclusive we are calling it spiritual."¹⁶ Through their cultural production the larger world would be transformed. By the last issue of the magazine, however, the goal was not necessarily universal political transformation but instead focused on the personal, the individual. When reflecting on the years of lesbian lands, Joyce Cheney, editor of the anthology *Lesbian Lands* reflected, "So many womyn moved back to the city: many womyns' lands went back to men. Why think of them as failures? ... We learned: our lives were changed by those times [emphasis original]."¹⁷ Thus, southern Oregon lesbian lands were political projects at their conception. Was that same political project, the defeat of patriarchy, sustained throughout the 1980s? Perhaps not. Nonetheless, *WomanSpirit* fulfilled the very function described by Rupp and Taylor. During this period, it carved out a place for personal renewal and sustenance.

¹⁶ WomanSpirit Editors, "Why WomanSpirit?," 1974.

¹⁷ Joyce Cheney, "Shining Amazonia," *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Summer 1984, 11.

Jean Mountaingrove had come to her own lesbianism while living at a Quaker center called Pendle Hill in Pennsylvania in the late 1960's. She had just gone through a divorce, her second, having determined that her husband had embraced the burgeoning drug culture too much for her liking. Jean went east from Los Angeles to Pennsylvania to figure out her next move. While at a consciousness-raising meeting run by lesbian author Rita May Brown, as Jean tells it, "I realized I had been loving women all along."¹⁸ She stayed there for only nine months but Pendle Hill was the location where she first acknowledged her new sexual identity, and this religious context hints at the focus of her life's work in the years to come. In addition, it was in Pennsylvania that she discovered the power of feminism and met her future partner Ruth at a Quaker single parents meeting.¹⁹

Although she had not identified with the drug culture as her ex-husband had, Jean had identified with much of the counterculture. She embraced the women's movement, especially the practice of consciousness-raising. Jean also decided to search out a rural place to live communally as she traveled back across the country in 1970. Her deep connection to nature pushed her toward a more rustic life (figure 3). With her two kids, Tane and Pann, in tow and the financial assuredness of someone raised middle class, with a mother as a financial safety net, Jean toured intentional communities across the West, looking for somewhere right to settle into. Worn out from months of travel, in October of

¹⁸ Jean Mountaingrove, interview with the author, 7 May, 2011, Wolf Creek, Oregon.

¹⁹ Kleiner, "Doin' It for Themselves," 41.

1970 she wrote to her new friend Ruth, “I decided not to undergo the long drive back East this year. I just can’t face all that traveling again so soon – esp. since we want to be in Oregon next summer. So I called Mt. Grove and we [Jean and her children] decided to return there and hassle the housing problem some way or other rather than travel longer.”²⁰ Leading the way for Ruth to follow her out West the following summer, Jean began her life in southern Oregon.



Figure 3. Jean Mountaingrove embracing a tree, 1975

But at Mountain Grove the liberating society she desired was not to be. Mountain Grove community was established in 1969 as a spiritual community, under the leadership

²⁰ Letter from Jean to Ruth, October 1970, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Box 5, Folder 4, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

of self-described teacher David Young.²¹ Young followed the teachings of Krishnamurti, an Indian guru who came to the US in the 1920s and proceeded to attract followers all across the country.²² At Mountain Grove the men, and some of the women, did not share Jean's interest in consciousness-raising and the insights about the nature of power it could bring. Writing to Ruth from Mountain Grove in early 1971, right before Ruth and several of her kids moved west to join Jean, she noted, "Several times I have wanted to talk with a women's liberationist about my feeling concerning the men here. I just don't completely trust my judgment, not enough to try to bring all the subtle repression out into the open. Most of the girls are aware and struggling by themselves but don't want to make an issue. No one feels strong enough or together enough. I hope this will change."²³ Once Ruth arrived Jean and Ruth faced the conservative gender roles in the community together; the two were outspoken in their opposition to the male domination and homophobia they experienced. This struggle solidified their political perspectives, as well as their relationship with each other. They both took the same last name, Mountaingrove, in reference to the place where they had come together.

This oppression was felt most deeply by Jean in regard to the woman's spirituality she and Ruth were beginning to develop. Finding a spiritual connection to a grove of Madrone trees in the hills above the communities buildings, Jean and Ruth began to spend long stretches of time creating rituals, songs, and poems amongst these trees, all in

²¹ Kleiner, "Doin' It for Themselves," 42; Kopp, *Eden within Eden*, 138.

²² Krishnamurti gained quite a countercultural following in the US. Included among his followers was back-to-the-land icon Helen Nearing, who in the 1920s became a follower and, for a time, intimate companion of Krishnamurti. For more on this relationship see: Margaret O Killinger, *The Good Life of Helen K. Nearing* (Burlington, Vt.: University of Vermont Press, 2007).

²³ Letter to Ruth from Jean, 17 January 1971, Box 5, Folder 4, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Coll. 309, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

an effort to express this deep-seated connection to the earth and to each other as women. They attempted to “get to know” their inner children, “playing” amongst the grove of old trees. They had a funeral for the child Ruth had miscarried 24 years earlier, grieving and crying, and burying the figurative ashes of the child in the grove.²⁴ They explored the connection between their spirituality and sexuality in the grove, getting precious alone time while spending secret evenings in the shadows of the trees. In early March 1972 they invited other women to join them in their sacred grove. Ruth wrote that Jean’s spiritual development had culminated “in the Sacred Grove with an initiation of the women at Mountain Grove ... Jean leading the women into the grove, wordlessly with openness, into the silence ... Initiated is Sharon’s [a community member’s] term – Jean and I called it sharing, Jean told the women she was letting them into her heart, meaning the grove, also meaning in a deep way into her feelings, and was overcome with weeping not because she was sad but because she was deeply moved.”²⁵

Awakening one day to the sound of chainsaws and eventually following the sound up the hill, the Mountaingroves found that the community leader, David Young, had cut down a similar grove of Madrones to the ones the Mountaingroves found sacred, in order to clear a space in which to build a house.²⁶ The destruction of these huge trees, without the consent of the community, which supposedly ran on a consensus model, became a turning point in Jean and Ruth’s future separatism. In the aftermath of the trees being cut down, the community sided with David Young, characterizing, according to Jean and

²⁴ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984),” April 17, 1972.

²⁵ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974),” March 4, 1972, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Box 9, Special Collections University of Oregon Knight Library.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Arbor Day, 1972.

Ruth, the Mountaingroves as trouble makers and odd due to their lesbianism. Jean and Ruth would return to this story again and again as the example of men's inability to understand the sacredness of nature and men's inability to understand lesbianism.²⁷ They had left the city to find a connection to nature and the freedom to explore their new identities, and in many ways they had. Nevertheless, even in an intentional community they were not free from various forms of oppression. Within two years they were asked to leave by community members.²⁸

This sexist and homophobic oppression made a significant impact on the course of the Mountaingrove's lives. In deciding to leave Mountain Grove, Jean and Ruth also decided to live apart from their children. All but one, Ruth's daughter Heather, were of age by 1973. The two male children opted to stay at Mountain Grove, while Heather went to a variety of alternative boarding schools over the next several years, until she came of age as well. From Mountain Grove, Jean and Ruth traveled up and down the west coast without their children for a year, trying to find both a lesbian community and land that they wanted to live on. They spent some formative time at Tai Farm, a communal woman's land outside of Mendocino, California. Eventually they moved onto land owned by a gay man, Carl Wittman, when they decided to return to Wolf Creek, in southern Oregon.²⁹ They lived in a little house on Carl's land, named Golden, until

²⁷ The story of their eviction is highlighted in: Kleiner, "Doin' It for Themselves," 43; Burmeister, "Women's Lands in southern Oregon," 82.

²⁸ Jean Mountaingrove interview, 7 May 2011.

²⁹ Jean and Ruth lived on land owned by Carl Wittman, a figure in LGBT history who certainly deserves to be the subject of more scholarship. In 1963, as a member of SDS, he coauthored, "An Interracial Movement of the Poor?" with Tom Hayden, as well as working on drafts of the "Port Huron Statement", before moving to San Francisco, where he penned a formative treatise on gay liberation, "A Gay Manifesto" in 1970. Wittman left urban life in 1971, choosing to settle in southern Oregon. Wittman is remembered in the southern Oregon folk dancing community for his institution of "gender-free" dance partnering.

1978, when they had again worn out their welcome. Conflicts over a lack of space and the lesbian separatism that many of the Mountaingrove's visitors were vocal about in front of Carl and his partner Allan led to a parting of the ways.³⁰

Meanwhile, the Mountaingroves had started production of *WomanSpirit Magazine* in 1974, with their first collective meeting held at Wolf Creek Park.³¹ The magazine was published for the first four years in a variety of locations including at Golden and at Womanshare, a neighboring women's land in southern Oregon.³² The idea for the magazine came from Jean. Her vision for *WomanSpirit Magazine* was as a place to develop and articulate a new spirituality and, through that, to express a new culture and ideology. In the fifth issue she wrote of the project as her "group task – to reach out to and to link up with women who want to change. My personal task is ecological pioneering and spiritual search in nature. I trust that the next phase of my life will become clear as I connect with women through *WomanSpirit* and as my intuition grows. I hope that land will be entrusted to our care, and a new way can grow there: a religious life, a seed of cultural rebirth – a new amazon tribe. My part is only one part, but I see

Wittman's relationship with the Mountaingroves is covered in more depth in the third chapter. For more on Carl Wittman see: Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2011. "A Gay Manifesto" can be found in: Karla Jay and Allen Young, eds., *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation* (New York: Douglas Book, 1972), 330–342.

³⁰ Jean Mountaingrove interview, 7 May 2011.

³¹ Ruth Mountaingrove, "Time Line," n.d., Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Box 37, Folder 1, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene.

³² Ibid.

that it is important.”³³ This, then, was a project that both helped other women and facilitated her own person growth and change. Both these things could be done only through the process of women coming to consciousness together.

For the Mountaingroves, *WomanSpirit* magazine was a vehicle that could share the new vision of spirituality that they and their fellow land community members were developing. The idea for the magazine came from the huge response to the spirituality issue the Mountaingroves’ had worked on in *Country Women Magazine*, a women’s back-to-the-land magazine produced in the early 1970s in Albion, California.³⁴ For the issue, they both contributed essays and did editorial work, learning many of the foundational publishing skills they would eventually use for their own publications.³⁵ The positive feedback Jean and Ruth had received from the spirituality issue showed them that there was a demand – a need in fact – to articulate the spiritual component of the political project of women’s liberation. By the time the first magazine was published the collective included eight women, but they had been assisted by at least eighteen other women along the way.³⁶ Members of the collective included the women from Womanshare Collective, the Mountaingroves neighbors in southern Oregon, who opened up their home for much of the production. The Mountaingroves themselves, and the popularity of the magazine they started, were key to the expansion of the lesbian-feminist

³³ Jean Mountaingrove, “... the Birthday I Gave Myself,” *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Fall 1975, 5.

³⁴ WomanSpirit Collective, “Who We Are...”; *Country Women: Spirituality*, Issue 10, April 1974. For more on *Country Women Magazine* see: Lynn, “Country Women: Back-to-the-Land Feminism and Radical Feminist Praxis in the Women’s Liberation Movement”; Sherry Thomas and Jeanne Tetrault, *Country Women: A Handbook for the New Farmer* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1976).

³⁵ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1974-1980),” 14 Feb 1974.

³⁶ WomanSpirit Collective, “Who We Are...”

community in southern Oregon, as well as the expanding number of women's lands in southern Oregon after the mid 1970s, as women were lured to southern Oregon by reading about the community in publications such as *WomanSpirit*.

WomanSpirit featured articles by the Mountaingroves and other lesbians living in southern Oregon, but it also included submissions by women living all across the country. From the first issue to the last, the Mountaingroves envisioned the magazine as a vehicle for long distance consciousness-raising. The final issue included an article titled "WomanSpirit Farewell Ritual," which described a ritual that was to be done by readers all across the globe, all at the same time.³⁷ Long before the social media revolution, Ruth and Jean sought to connect women all around the world on a personal level, creating a vehicle for isolated women to bond, find solace, and gain enlightenment without being in the same room.

Throughout its ten years of production, the magazine benefitted from the dependable editorial and production work of the Mountaingroves, as well as a revolving cast of editors, production assistants, and contributors from across the country and the globe (figure 4). The publication of each issue began by sorting through submissions of all kinds. The *WomanSpirit* collective then had to manually layout the issues: typing, cutting, and pasting the huge variety of pieces together in a way that both maximized the amount of women's work they could get into each issue and presented the work in a beautiful and creative way. This process, which did not rely on modern word processing but instead relied on an electric typewriter powered by a marine battery, was a painstaking process that the Mountaingroves, and the collection of women helping on any

³⁷ Lisariel, "WomanSpirit Farewell Ritual," *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Summer 1984, 24–25.

given issue, would devote four weeks to, with six weeks off between each production.³⁸ The combination of the steadfast work on the Mountaingroves part and the injection of new energy and work for each issue kept the magazine in production. Eventually sold in a variety of radical and women's bookstores across the US, *WomanSpirit* was widely read in lesbian-feminist circles and drew women to its vision of the possibilities of separatism and the connection that women could have with the earth. While estimates of readership are hard to quantify, the magazine was sold at over one hundred women's bookstores across the country, each printing was two thousand copies, and they had over eight hundred annual subscriptions at the end of their run in 1984.³⁹



Figure 4. Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove work on the first issue of *WomanSpirit Magazine*

The parameters of land-based spirituality in *WomanSpirit Magazine* are difficult to define because they were coming from a spiritual project that was designed as non-hierarchical and always in flux. For instance women's spirituality had no central canon

³⁸ Ruth Mountaingrove, "The Sybil Inside Us," *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Summer 1982.

³⁹ Kleiner, "Doin' It for Themselves," 46.

or gurus, and terms such as “spiritual” or even “goddess” meant vastly different things to different contributors. That said, several key aspects seem to have been agreeable to most participants over the span of the magazine’s publication. The intent of the magazine was focused on consciousness-raising as spiritual practice between women. Contributors repeatedly expressed that there were natural characteristics inherent in women that enabled a spiritual connection with the earth, which in turn participants also gendered female. An emphasis on sharing personally created rituals was central to many articles and it highlighted the ability of any woman to create rituals, texts, or songs that then could become central to personal and group spiritual practice. Finally, the goal of eliminating male influence and doctrine from historical spiritual traditions in order to reestablish female-centered religious traditions to their true importance, centrality, and truth appears to have been one of the fundamental goals of the publication. Whereas some outside of feminism might have perceived radical feminists as culturally and socially untethered women, and lesbians built an ethic, a moral code, a history, and rules of conduct around the idea of a collective sisterhood.

The earnest way in which writers in *WomanSpirit* expressed their spiritual transformations and ideologies may be disconcerting to modern readers. Poems, essays, and art all expressed a heartfelt desire to articulate beliefs and connect with other women on a spiritual level. There is no irony, relatively little humor or satire, but instead a clear sincerity about their spiritual undertaking. While their efforts to co-opt religious and cultural aspects of other traditions may read as postmodern to some, postmodern

skepticism is totally absent from their writings.⁴⁰ In fact, they actively policed the kind of “coolness” that can breed judgment and close off sincerity. In the fall of 1980, Kate Blem wrote, “When women feel they need to be doing all of the spiritually “in” things, I sense an atmosphere of judgement [sic]... It is understandable, of course, after years of social conditioning that has pitted us against each other that we still have remnants of the competition... Yet I am saddened by our self-oppression.”⁴¹ They were involved in a project that sought truths, not ambiguity or uncertainty, but the effort to enforce sincerity only further policed the boundaries of their spirituality and identities. While their conceptions of sexuality as construction read as modern – one could argue almost pre-queer in fact – it was their essentialized view of gender and sex that actually supported their worldview.

While not following any particular religious tradition, the spirituality produced in *WomanSpirit Magazine* sought to connect lesbian-feminists and consciousness-raising with a belief in something larger. Women participated in circles and group practice, in addition to doing individual rituals and meditations.⁴² In land-based spirituality a personal connection to the spirit of the earth was then combined with the basic principles of psychology that had permeated society. *WomanSpirit* had a therapeutic sensibility, espousing a land-based spirituality that reflected the importance of personal transformation and introspection in the process of spiritual awakening. While individual

⁴⁰ Historian Philip Deloria in particular has categorized the New Age use of religious and cultural artifacts and traditions outside of their context as postmodern. See: Philip J. Deloria, “Counterculture Indians and the New Age,” in *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 154–180.

⁴¹ Kate Blem, “Spirituality: Correct/Incorrect,” *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Fall 1980.

⁴² Hawk Madrone, *Weeding at Dawn: A Lesbian Country Life* (New York: Alice Street Editions, 2000), 157–164.

transformation was always central to the spirituality on lesbian lands, it became the end goal as opposed to the vehicle through which a broader political process could occur.

This personal transformation was about connecting with what many characterized as their “true-selves.” They believed that patriarchy and modernity had corrupted their ability to find their true selves and that through consciousness-raising and spirituality they could find what had been lost. In the first issue of *WomanSpirit* Jean wrote of a need to connect her inner child and her outer self in order to “start a dialogue between my subconscious and my ordinary life, to restore the balance of my selves, I have been creating rituals which will focus the deep energy into the areas where I am searching.”⁴³ This focus on introspection was acknowledged throughout *WomanSpirit* as a necessary project for personal transformation. They acknowledged that their personal spiritual quest was self-absorbed, however necessary. This self-reflexive impulse was not necessarily due to any innate personal flaw or shortcoming but rooted in the need to deal with the ways in which the patriarchy had damaged them. For example, issue number 14 has articles on a variety of the ways they thought patriarchy had affected them, with women expressing long repressed emotions such as depression, anxiousness, and anger, all explored in order to excise and overcome the emotional trauma of being a woman in a patriarchal world.⁴⁴

Helping each other to identify and heal from trauma was an important underlying purpose of the magazine, and the lesbian-feminist project in general. The identification of trauma included an understanding that a wide variety of ills and a broad definition of

⁴³ Jean Mountaingrove, “Speaking to Ourselves,” *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Fall 1974, 27.

⁴⁴ *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Summer 1977.

violence that women needed to heal from. In the 1970s Mary Daly even boldly stated that, “Every woman who has come to consciousness can recall an almost endless series of oppressive, violating, insulting, assaulting acts against her Self. Every woman is battered by such assaults – is, on a psychic level, a battered woman.”⁴⁵ While those who have experienced physical trauma may object to the universalizing of Daly’s sentiments, the sentiments of those writing in *WomanSpirit* and Daly’s work defined trauma in similarly broad terms. With the parameters of trauma ranging from physical abuse to mental or emotional damage from the ills of society in general, the magazine promoted the ability of women’s spirituality to help women overcome a variety of personal traumas. Anne Cvetkovich has argued that some sites of lesbian public culture aid in the recovery from trauma because they “do not pathologize it, [they] seize control over it from the medical experts, and [they] forge creative responses to it that far outstrip even the most utopian of therapeutic and political solutions.”⁴⁶ While Cvetkovich does not tie this directly to consciousness-raising, the discourse around trauma in *WomanSpirit Magazine* was certainly grounded in the personal and political connection in the feminist practice. This was the Mountaingrove’s creative response to trauma, believing that feminist spirituality could serve an important therapeutic function. Working together, women could heal their wounds, end their isolation, and bring insight into their experiences, even experiences of terror and hopelessness, through sharing a spiritual connection with each other.⁴⁷ Their specific project of healing was grounded in the overall project of separatism, once again

⁴⁵ Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 348.

⁴⁶ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 3.

⁴⁷ Lisa, Ruth, Jean, and Pan, “Our Vision of WomanSpirit,” *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Spring 1975, 62.

reflected in Jean Mountaingrove's metaphor of women's land as a hospital in which women could heal from the patriarchy.

Deciding how to define what a woman should or could be included in this project of healing was negotiated on the pages of *WomanSpirit*. Women were nurturers, or at least they tried to get in touch with that instinct; women were emotionally and spiritually connected to some aspect of nature, or at least they attempted to find some piece of nature that really spoke to them; and women had bodies that both gave life, as the earth does, and could be seen in reflections in nature. These parameters spelled out who belonged and who did not on lesbian lands. One did not have to be actively engaged in a romantic relationship with another woman, but connection to the earth and to one's own body were of central importance. The spiritual journey to the "true-self" or to be "one" with one's own body then created the foundation of the general lesbian land worldview.

Land lesbians' belief in a binary of male versus female characteristics formed the basis of the political project these women believed they were performing through their spirituality. They could conceptualize the construction of sexual identity – they understood lesbian sexual identity as a political choice not as biology – but they conceived of certain gender characteristics as "natural." That is where a boundary was made. Kate Blem articulated her belief in both the power of spirituality and innate characteristics of men and women when she stated, "While men are still hung up in their rational minds, we can be using the spiritual/psychic side of ourselves to effect change and recreate our own culture."⁴⁸ Rationality, then, was either not a natural characteristic

⁴⁸ Kate Blem, "Spirituality: Correct/Incorrect," 29.

of women or something that women had discarded in order to reach a higher plane, the spiritual plane.

As the political project of a separate women's culture morphed over the years into a more internal, personal project of self-transformation, so called innate characteristics of men and women still predominated. Unlike many of the religious traditions appropriated and reconceived during the height of New Age spirituality in the U.S., the spiritual practices in *WomanSpirit* avoided a focus on a positive duality of male and female characteristics, such as the gendered implications of Yin and Yang appropriated from a variety of Chinese religious traditions by the counterculture. Instead, according to land lesbians, women were more attuned to the earth and were nurturers in much the same way that the earth nurtured all life on the planet. The spiritual quest for the individual then was to get in tune with this natural nurturing essence.

Sex and gender were closely linked in the spirituality of land-based lesbians. In order to understand the significance of their reliance on the perceived connection between sex and gender it may be helpful to remember that binary physical sex categories, categories we may understand as "natural," are actually socially constructed as well. With this understanding, drawn from the work of Judith Butler, we can see how land lesbians' understanding of the category of women was not based on some sort of inherent or natural biological difference but actually on a set of physical characteristics that they then associated and made mean something important.⁴⁹ In general, denaturalizing a socially agreed upon difference between men and women actually helps us historicize our relationship to bodies. For the women in this community, physical parts, such as vaginas,

⁴⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). On the instability of the sexed category of "woman" see chapter 1, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire."

clitorises, and breasts, became the dividing line for their political identity, which they framed as based in “natural” difference. Certain physical sex characteristics became a necessary part of having the gendered characteristics they associated with women, for instance a connection with the earth as a mother.⁵⁰

The physical female body was at the core of lesbian land-based spirituality. In addition to gendering the land as soft, feminine, caring, and nurturing they also sexed the land by imprinting female body parts onto the landscape. Mara from Santa Fe wrote a piece of fiction for *WomanSpirit* in 1984 that included this embodiment placed on the landscape, “This piece of land was known by those who lived there as the Womanland because in its outline could be seen the body of a woman. A flat belly led to a pubis pine grove opening onto a lake whose banks were her open thighs. Behind her belly rose two mountainous breasts, one half-again as high as the other, and behind them the outline of her shoulders was visible...”⁵¹ Below this text was placed a line drawing, which clearly brought the authors detailed description to fruition (figure 5). Here the categories of sex and gender converge in the peaks and valleys of a simple landscape.

⁵⁰ Historian Catherine Kleiner wrote about how land lesbians gendered, and sexualized, the land in: Catherine Kleiner, “Nature’s Lovers: The Erotics of Lesbian Land Communities in Oregon, 1974 - 1984,” in *Seeing Nature Through Gender*, ed. Virginia J. Scharff (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 242–262.

⁵¹ Mara - Santa Fe, New Mexico, “Womanland,” *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Summer 1984, 12.



Figure 5. Drawing from *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Summer 1984

As we can see in the image above, this spiritual tradition challenged any boundary between the human body and nature. The relationship between the human body and nature is not just intimate or part of a system that is interconnected, but they are one and the same. This sameness allowed women to claim the earth, not as owners per se, but as part of the universal sisterhood they were so invested in. On the cover of the Fall 1982 issue of *WomanSpirit* the intimate connection between women's bodies and the earth was even more explicit (figure 6). The mid section of a human body, one with breasts, a small belly, and round hips, thus instantly readable as female, is the source of life to a tree growing out of its side. Here the earth is indisputably female, both in terms of anatomical parts and the assumption that female sex equates to certain gendered qualities, qualities that include the aforementioned nurturing and caring that supposedly comes naturally to women.



Figure 6. *WomanSpirit Magazine* cover

In addition to a connection between women's sex classification and their "natural" gendered attributes, lesbian land-based spirituality had a sexualized vision of universal sisterhood imbued with religious significance. This spirituality highlighted a connection between women as mothers, both figuratively and literally, as well as on the earth as a mother, sister, and in some cases, even a lover. The position of the earth as a mother and a lover caused some discussion on the part of the Mountaingroves early on in their spiritual development, with Ruth asking in her diary whether the fact that they "are her priestesses and her children," was, "a paradox." This dual connection did not seem to be a paradox for many in the lesbian-feminist community in southern Oregon. Catherine Kleiner wrote of the "erotics of lesbian land" asserting that some women in the community "put sexuality at the heart of [a] mix of ingredients of the spirit politics of

lesbian land.”⁵² Going on to quote a poem by southern Oregon community member Bethroot Gwynn, which engaged with the idea that the earth was both her mother and her lover, Kleiner wrote, “the poem reflects an explicitly sexual relationship with nature understood as female. Nature is mother and / or sexual partner – the two roles are not mutually exclusive or diametrically opposed.”⁵³

Land lesbians’ relationship to motherhood was particularly tension-filled and complex even outside of their pseudo-incestuous relationship with the mother earth. They continually tried to negotiate their rejection of the role that motherhood played in the dominant society with their spiritual belief in the importance of birth and nurturing. For instance, following an article written by Ruth Mountaingrove about her experience with motherhood, the collective group producing the magazine felt conflicted enough about the tension between motherhood and liberation to put their negotiations about the article into print. Their central concern was that they needed to acknowledge that they understood the conflict between the naturalness of motherhood and the unnaturalness of the forced role of mother in the mass culture. This tension was never resolved throughout the ten year run but evolved into two distinct avenues of discourse: women as mothers in the model of the earth as a mother and the discussion of women’s personal relationships with their mothers. In the first case, avoiding the real political implications of mothering, and in the second, focusing on the individual repercussions of the ills of the outside world.

Not all discourse in *WomanSpirit* revolved around motherhood, however. Contributors often engaged with a variety of religious traditions, debating their history,

⁵² Kleiner, “Nature’s Lovers: The Erotics of Lesbian Land Communities in Oregon, 1974 - 1984,” 252.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 253.

importance, and truth. There were certain religious traditions that the women involved with *WomanSpirit* found acceptable and others they rejected, usually based on whether or not the traditions could be gendered female. In turn, the acceptance or rejection of these cultural traditions was based on how these women gendered the cultures these religious traditions came from. Native American, African, and Asian religious traditions were overwhelmingly gendered female; their true essences thus were characterized as being based in the earth, in nurturing, and peaceful spiritual quests, while Judeo-Christian traditions were gendered male, with conquest and patriarchy as their backbone. In a transcribed conversation about a prayer to the goddess Ishtar they had printed, the editors of *WomanSpirit* rejected patriarchy, essentialized women, and embraced East Asian and Native American tradition as female all in one article. Editor Mountainspirit stated, “I see that the patriarchy had taken a material goody [*sic*] view of the world. I see the spiritual side of the intuitive nature of woman. I feel intuition is totally valid and if we could trust, love and nurture it we would have much more clarity. I feel that the concrete, patriarchal view of the world is rape. This is what had happened. I want to get back to intuition. That was the way the American Indian lived. This is what patriarchy hasn’t paid any attention to, and intuition is female.”⁵⁴

In their desire for a universal sisterhood across lines of race and class, the contributors of *WomanSpirit Magazine* may have unintentionally kept women of color disinterested due to their generalizations and characterizations of women of color. Perhaps the problem went even deeper. In *Feminism’s New Age*, author Karlyn Crowley states, “All of the New Age communities [she has] observed fetishize the ancient

⁵⁴ “What Is This Goddess Business?,” *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Fall 1976, 10.

ancestors of remote origin: from an ... Indian past ... an Asian pastoral ... to Goddess worshippers who long to “return” to the black body and a perfect matriarchy. White women fanaticize a utopian harmony wherein they already have the “primitive” within.”⁵⁵ Crowley argues that New Age white women appropriated other cultures when alliances with actual women of color had failed. This cultural appropriation had the double benefit of allowing white women to feel the benefits of multiculturalism, while allowing them to avoid the realities, conflicts, and changes that a truly multicultural movement might have required.

In fact, attempts to get large numbers of women of color to move to Oregon had repeatedly failed. Author LaVerne Gagehabib, herself a woman of color and a former resident of the lesbian-feminist lands in southern Oregon, cites separatism as forcing an undesirable choice for women of color between their communities of color and lesbian communities. She also cites the whiteness of the surrounding population in southern Oregon as a hindrance to women of color feeling at home in the region.⁵⁶ Perhaps the peaceful and easy spiritual connection land lesbians sought in a universal sisterhood could come to fruition only in the absence of real women of color to complicate this universality. The drive then was not just to personally create a new type of spirituality that connected the individual to nature but also to draw on supposed female-centered religious traditions in order to connect women in general, across cultures and eventually

⁵⁵ Karlyn Crowley, *Feminism's New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 165.

⁵⁶ For a moving account of how she came to southern Oregon and her position and views as a woman of color in a very white community, see the introduction written by La Verne Gagehabib: Barbara Summerhawk and La Verne Gagehabib, *Circles of Power*, 10–12.

across time; however, this cultural appropriation likely detracted from their ability to make relationships with actual women of color in their own era.

While the number of women of color in southern Oregon was small, the exact number of women of color who wrote in *WomanSpirit* is impossible to know. Still, in the later issues of the magazine there were more articles authored by self-proclaimed women of color and excerpts from well-known women of color authors, such as Audre Lorde. The overall composition of these issues is best described as conflicted, as articles that continue to rely on the cultural appropriation and primitivism of the New Age were published along side pieces by women of color writing about the realities of living in a racist society. These issues conceivably illustrate the increasingly divergent voices in feminism during the early 1980s, as women of color continued to demand that feminist discourse that whitewashed both “universal” sisterhood and the problems of women in general did not represent their realities, desires, or needs.

Indeed, discussions of race and spirituality were not the topic of central concern over the course of the magazine’s ten-year run. According to the index that Jean completed in 1989, the topic that was referenced most often in *WomanSpirit* was “Goddess.” The number of articles about goddesses in its ten years of publication reflects the increase in interest in goddess worship across the country. This term did not have a fixed meaning for all contributors of the magazine, and it’s meaning changed over time.⁵⁷ While one contributor titled her piece, “goddess with a small ‘g,’” other contributors wrote about their interest in established goddesses (with a capital “G”).⁵⁸ In

⁵⁷ *WomanSpirit Index: Your Comprehensive Guide to the Decade of Women’s Spirituality, 1974-1984* (Sunny Valley, Or: WomanSpirit, 1989).

⁵⁸ Fran Rominski, “Goddess with a Small G,” *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Fall 1974, 4.

the first issue contributor Fran Rominski wrote, “I do not believe in a Goddess. Not a Goddess who exists as a being or person. Yes, the goddess who is each of us, the one within, and to that goddess is the clarity of presentation each of us may attain. By clarity of presentation I mean the acting/responding woman – she who sees the presentation of life, nature, and returns in kind, directly; strong clear acts.”⁵⁹ By the early 1980s, however, goddess began to take on a literal and historical meaning. As land-based lesbians worked on the project of creating a history of women’s spirituality, interest in historical goddesses increased in the magazine. Articles about a variety of goddesses proliferated throughout the 1980s, including articles on Demeter, Athena, Ishtar, and Diana, to name just a few. This undertaking attempted to create an authentic spiritual tradition of women across cultures and time, as opposed to the original intent of inventing something completely new. Instead of a spiritual tradition with broad political implications for the ills contributors saw in their own time, spirituality became centered on connection to a supposed lost past of female power.

Alongside goddesses, historical matriarchies were used as examples of women’s historical position of power and self-determination and were foundational to the construction of a historical narrative of women’s spirituality. This was yet another project in claiming historical space. Claiming a female centered spiritual past allowed these women to be introspective and to remain political at the same time. They articulated a long and vast conspiracy to suppress knowledge of women’s history of power, and thus they viewed their project as an assault on the institution of patriarchy itself. In an article titled “Myths and Matriarchies,” contributor Sally Binford wrote, “For

⁵⁹ Ibid., 48.

centuries, males controlled access to historical records and wrote of the past in ways that denied our former greatness. This conspiracy had been carried on by anthropologists who have consistently denied the existence of a state of pre-patriarchal matriarchy... It is one more striking example of suppression of the truth.”⁶⁰ Binford expressed her political understanding of the power of patriarchy, while at the same time working on the personal project of seeking spiritual truth.

Toward the end of its run, the editors of *WomanSpirit* were actively regulating the magazine’s inclusion of any reference to men, even in terms of addressing the once central issue of patriarchy. While at the beginning of its publication the magazine addressed many issues relating to patriarchy, for instance anger, power, or violence, and articulated the broader intent of their project as one that would facilitate the overthrow of patriarchy, by the 1980s the Mountaingroves wanted less emphasis on the negative and more on what they saw as the positive – women’s culture. In the summer 1982 issue, editor Caroline Overman wrote an article about how the editorial group, at the urging of Ruth Mountaingrove, had grappled with the idea that men’s presence was now too central in the magazine. Ruth was quoted as stating, “You know what I think... I think there are getting to be too many men in this magazine. I thought WomanSpirit was a place where you could find a woman’s presence, like a woman-only concert. Why are we printing all this stuff about the patriarchy?”⁶¹ The point of *WomanSpirit* by 1982 then was not to address the problems of the outside world, including issues that were still all too relevant to lesbians living outside of separatism, but instead to focus on the things they as a group

⁶⁰ Sally Binford, “Myths and Matriarchies,” *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Fall 1979, 12.

⁶¹ Caroline Overman, “The Scholar in Hot Pursuit,” *WomanSpirit Magazine*, 1983, pg. 54.

of women had created. No longer was the explicit goal of the magazine the overthrow of the patriarchy. The cultural project itself had taken center stage.

In the third issue of *WomanSpirit Magazine*, the editors had articulated an overarching vision for the magazine in a way that the Mountaingroves still felt to be true ten years later, when the magazine ended. They stated, “Our vision of WomanSpirit is of an experiment in using a magazine to share experiences of individual women in ways that are similar to a consciousness-raising group... To “raise” our “consciousness” here means to illumine our former confusion, to heal our wounds, to end our isolation – to bring acceptance and insight into all of our experiences.”⁶² A noble aim to be sure. This vision did not mention patriarchy, goddesses, “ancient” cultures, or female bodies, but instead envisioned a project of clarity, healing, and kinship. And indeed it clearly that it brought a real sense of connection and healing to women all across the country. Through the letters to the editors of the last issue of *WomanSpirit*, we can see the impact the magazine had on individual women’s lives, with a wide variety of women truly lamenting the end of the magazine and a handful even advertising groups they were starting in order to continue contact with the spiritual community they had been a part of. Through the publication a space was created for women to explore ways of connecting feminism and spirituality, ways of healing from trauma, and ways of reframing their spirituality to better express the totality of their experiences as women in the world.

The magazine did not end because this project had been completed. Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove were exhausted from years of producing a magazine in the rugged hills of southern Oregon. Their individual health had begun to fade, and the demands of

⁶² Lisa, Ruth, Jean, and Pan, “Our Vision of WomanSpirit,” 2.

quarterly production became too much. After ten years, their desire to make connections with a broad women's community had not faded, but their desire to be the vehicles for that long distance relationship had. Jean wanted more time to work in her garden and to enjoy her life at Rootworks. There were also all of the maintenance projects that had been put off: "the installation of a water system; road repair; finishing our storage building, greenhouse and porch on the Moon House."⁶³ Jean's feminist spiritual journey was not ending either, as she asked in the final issue for women to send her both "seeds that other women have grown" and "intuitions, visions, ideas, and/or information about menstrual rituals, moon huts, psychic processes during the menstrual cycle."⁶⁴ Jean was still interested in connecting with women in her larger community, just not in such a time intensive way.

WomanSpirit Magazine was a product of a unique historical moment, when a variety of the large-scale social changes going on across the United States in the 1960s and 1970s converged in southern Oregon. Lesbian-feminists, including land lesbians, drew on radical and cultural feminist ideology to articulate their political and personal belief in the importance of women's culture. Although scholars have debated whether the shift toward cultural feminism and lesbian feminism did or did not mean an end to the larger radical political project of feminism, the women producing *WomanSpirit Magazine* saw their project at its inception as a cultural project with transformative political implications. With a political foundation to their culture, lesbian feminists grappled with the contradictions inherent in matching personal identity with political beliefs. Efforts to

⁶³ Jean Mountaingrove and Ruth Mountaingrove, "From WomanSpirit," *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Summer 1984, 63.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

inject universal conceptions about women into lesbian feminist ideology, identity, culture, and politics were in many cases incompatible with the realities of women's daily lives. In the end, their vision of a diverse community of women did not come to fruition. The development of their spiritual tradition attempted to connect all women through a relationship to the earth and sought to recreate a vast historical past to women's spirituality through the coopting of a variety of spiritual traditions that they considered female in essence.

The highly gendered worldview of the land-based lesbians is illustrated by their insistence on gendering as female all things they cherished, for example the landscape, the earth as a whole, and so-called ancient cultures of people of color, while gendering all the ills and problems of the world as male. They attempted to produce a universalizing vision of female spirituality while they simultaneously policed the boundaries of female identity. With our current understandings of the social construction and fluidity of gender and sex, land lesbians' essentialism about women reads as old fashioned, archaic, or antithetical to progress. Some ask why lesbian-feminists cannot absorb and embrace the fluidity of sex and gender in the modern age. Yet, asking land-lesbian spiritualists to change their views on what constitutes a female body, for instance, would require a full-scale overhaul of the very foundations of the worldview they themselves created. It would be particularly hard, yet highly productive, for them to convert their spirituality to accommodate a more inclusive definition of "woman." Their spirituality is founded on only one universal ideal and that is the female body. The female body is their connection to the earth and to each other; it's what makes their culture meld. While queer critiques of categories of identity have focused on the need for a broad coalition based on

difference – in the words of writer Jeffrey Escoffier, “the politics of identity must also be a politics of difference” – land-based lesbians in Oregon responded to the contradictions of identity politics with a focus on personal transformation and a reliance on historical reimagining to replace the real cross-cultural coalition they desired.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Jeffrey Escoffier, *American Homo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1998), 64.

CHAPTER III

RUTH MOUNTAINGROVE AND FEMINIST PHOTOGRAPHY

To commemorate her 60th birthday in 1983, Ruth Mountaingrove took some time alone to reflect on her life thus far. As a lifelong artist, someone who expressed herself best through a variety of artistic disciplines—writing poetry and songs, playing guitar, and singing, to name a few—it was through her photography that she celebrated this particular milestone. Alone in a room at Rootworks, Ruth created a series of black-and-white self-portraits that document her body and her evolving relationship to that body at sixty years old.¹

Thirty years later these images resonate with their simultaneously personal and political intentions. Taken in a dimly lit room, the shape of which is barely discernable in the background, some of the images present Ruth Mountaingrove naked, stripped of all worldly possessions and yet confident in her skin. Others show Ruth with specific items of importance, her guitar for instance, referencing her interests at sixty years of age. Without the long hair or horn-rimmed glasses that had so defined her look in the early 1970s, Ruth's self-portraits do not reveal their era. She appears with short trimmed hair that is feminine and "appropriate" for a woman of her age and with no glasses, but with the subtle squinting of someone clearly nearsighted. The build of Ruth's body, normally appearing tall and slim under her daily work clothes, is revealed to be full of curves,

¹ Archival note by Ruth Mountaingrove, 25 May 1993, Folder 6, Box 31, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Collection 309, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

softer and looser than her clothed body would suggest. These curves, which conceivably came along with her five pregnancies two decades earlier, are highlighted by some of her poses, in which she appears squatting on the ground, hunching over, or curling up.

Holding each pose perfectly still for the two to three minutes it took to finish the long exposures, one can imagine a combination of fatigue and determination setting in for Ruth right at the end.² The tone of these photographs varies, some with Ruth's knowing smile revealing a few crooked teeth and a joyous atmosphere. Others read as somber and introspective, conveying a clear seriousness of intent and perhaps some lingering reservation about arriving at 60 years of age. Either way, these self-produced images reveal a woman whose feminist project of self-transformation is well underway. They are all at once a personal and a political statement about the lesbian-feminist project of self-discovery and self-actualization, a project that went to the heart of what she, and other women, envisioned and experienced on Oregon women's lands.

What are the implications of a sixty-year-old woman embracing and documenting the reality of her body? For Ruth it was part of a larger project of personal and political transformation, one that had radically reshaped her life and her worldview since she had joined the women's movement more than ten years earlier. For lesbians in the early 1970s, the physical body was a political part of their beings and played a particularly influential role in illustrating that the personal was political. Bodies were not just about personal carriage in the world but were central to defining their romantic partners and a fundamental aspect of their political identities. Historically, the control of women's bodies has been a potent means which patriarchal systems of domination have held on to

² Ibid.

power.³ Thus, ending the physical domination of women was a key part of the Women's Liberation Movement and feminist movements in general. By exposing her naked form, Ruth showed that she was in control of how her body was presented to the world. She had embraced her body in spite – or fittingly, because of – its difference from patriarchal standards of beauty. In addition, merely through the act of photographing that body, she was implying that the image was an important one that others should see. From Ruth's perspective, the creation of these self-portraits must have been a uniquely personal and political action, an artistic statement that aligned well with her identity as a separatist lesbian-feminist.

As discussed earlier, while some scholars such as Alice Echols have claimed that cultural and lesbian feminisms were apolitical, we can see through the photography done by lesbian-feminists that they were producing a clear feminist political message.⁴ These messages included the rejection of gendered ideas about appropriate labor, the rejection of the archetype of the asexual lesbian relationship, and the rejection of traditional ideals of female beauty and desirability. While these political messages were obviously tied to cultural transformation more than to the reform of systems of state and governmental hierarchy, the women engaged in the work of changing culture saw it as the first step toward larger institutional changes, including changing larger state structures.⁵ Even

³ For a few examples see: Dorothy E Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage books, 1997); Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); Wendy Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁴ Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*.

⁵ Discussions of the need for large-scale structural changes to US society can be seen in lesbian feminist publications such as WomanSpirit Magazine, particularly in early issues, as well as Ruth Mountaingrove's diary.

those who have defended lesbian-feminists, and their separatism, as a place where feminist energies were recharged have not fully investigated the ways in which lesbian-feminists, in this case rural separatist lesbian-feminists, were actively engaged in discourse outside of their physically and ideologically isolated locations.⁶ Through the publications produced on women's lands, as well as through the other public projects created there, we can see that separatist lesbian-feminist communities attempted to shape specific discourses outside of their immediate circles. We can see this project in action more clearly through a close look at the photographic culture in the southern Oregon lesbian community including feminist photography camps, called Ovulars, held from 1978 to 1982 at Rootworks, and the feminist photography magazine *The Blatant Image*, published annually from 1981 to 1983.

Ruth Mountaingrove came to southern Oregon in 1971, following Jean's lead out West. Like many lesbians in the southern Oregon lesbian community, Ruth had come to lesbianism through feminism and the women's movement. While a bit older than the typical counterculture convert—Ruth was in her early fifties at the time—she was actively and enthusiastically engaged in the important social changes of the 1960s and 1970s. Consciousness-raising, the most powerful tool of the women's movement, urged women to understand that the individual inequalities they faced in their daily lives, in their homes for instance, were connected to a larger system of oppression of women. For Ruth, a newly divorced woman living in Pennsylvania with four children, the women's

⁶ For more on the restorative nature of cultural and lesbian feminisms see: Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, "Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism," *Signs* 19 (1993): 32–61.

movement allowed her to examine her life thus far and what she wanted out of the rest of her life, as well as giving her the courage to make those desires a reality.

In the fall of 1970 Jean sent Ruth a letter from Los Angeles. With an idealistic vision of what lay ahead for her, Jean had attempted to lure Ruth away from Philadelphia toward her vision of their idyllic future in the West. “I hope you and Heather and the Mustang will make it across the US next summer.” She wrote, “It will be so good to sit under the pines and watch the stars come out while we talk of the years past, the years ahead. I also hope we have some work to do with our hands while we talk. Picking beans was very satisfying as the garden was so clean and luxuriant. There is so much idle time while there is so much need of money – perhaps it is necessary not to be physically occupied – there is so much I am unsure of but happy to explore about group living.”⁷ While not overtly sexual, her words do hint at a sensuality and intimacy the two women saw in the physicality of labor and the closeness of deep conversation. Still strangers in large part when Ruth came to Oregon, this intimate sharing and the closeness that comes in relationships when two people are just getting to know each other became the foundation of the relationship they shared, much like an intimate consciousness-raising group of two. Jean’s letter clearly illustrates that she was already envisioning a long life together with Ruth in the country.

In Jean’s letter the huge amount of physical work they had ahead of them, especially once they bought their own land, Rootworks, in 1978, was not yet imaginable. For her, the physicality of their future life must have seemed almost romantic, not a matter of survival. Her vision of Ruth’s visit was idyllic, with days spent only in each

⁷ Letter from Jean to Ruth, 5 October 1970, Box 5, Folder 4, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Coll. 309, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

other's company, exploring their connections to each other; however, this peaceful and easy vision of life with Ruth did not reflect the nature of their lives the summer Ruth moved to Mountain Grove, as few fantasies do. In reality, Ruth and Jean had very little time to themselves that first summer, or in fact in many of the years to come. That first summer they crammed into a small A-frame house at Mountain Grove, with the four children they had brought with them, leading to little down time or privacy for Ruth and Jean together.⁸

Their years to come in southern Oregon would be filled mostly by their involvement in an emerging women's community and, closely connected with that, numerous creative projects they would undertake together. Starting with *WomanSpirit Magazine*, the Mountaingroves began a series of publication projects, all related to some aspect of the women's movement. For Ruth, some of the publications were a way to publically express her political identity through artistic expression. An avid photographer and musician, Ruth published a songbook filled with songs related to women's liberation, called *Turned on Woman Songbook*, in 1975, through the press she and Jean had created, New Woman Press.⁹ Following that, Ruth turned to women's photography as a focus (figure 7). Photography was not a new creative outlet for Ruth. It is clear that she was already an avid photographer when she moved to southern Oregon. While living at Golden she even convinced Carl Wittman to turn his unused bathroom into a darkroom, needing a designated place to develop her film and her prints.¹⁰

⁸ Time Line, Box 37, Folder 1, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Coll 309, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁹ Ruth Mountaingrove, *Turned on Woman Songbook* (Wolf Creek, OR: New Woman Press, 1975).

¹⁰ "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1974-1980)," February 1975.

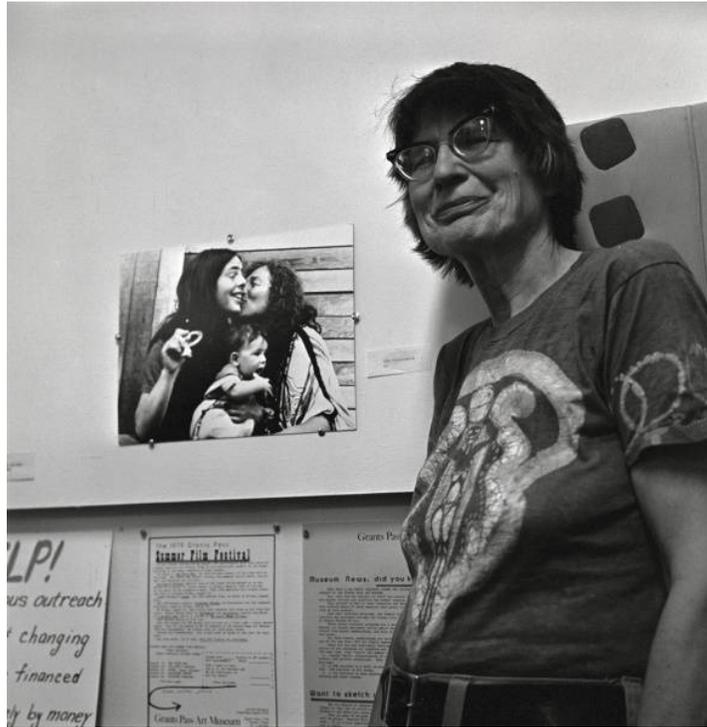


Figure 7. Ruth Mountaingrove with her photo

By 1978, however, after settling into their new home at Rootworks, Ruth felt like her photography was at a standstill. Production of *WomanSpirit Magazine* and the many tasks associated with rural homesteading kept Ruth and Jean busy most of the time but photography was an important passion that Ruth wanted to continue to develop. It was then that Jean came up with two feminist photography projects for Ruth. The first would be a feminist photography camp that they could run at Rootworks, and the second would be the production of a magazine of feminist photography (figure 8). These projects would fulfill several needs: the camps would help the couple financially, and both the camp and the magazine would connect Ruth to other feminist photographers.¹¹ Through the camp, which came to be known by the term “Ovular,” and the magazine, titled *The*

¹¹ Jean Mountaingrove, et al., “The Blatant Image: Her Story,” *The Blatant Image*, 1981.

Blatant Image, Ruth would be able to develop her personal craft and personal relationships – engaging in a photographic consciousness-raising event of sorts – as well as shape and contribute to the larger discourse around the position of women’s voice, vision, bodies, and representation in the art world and beyond.



Figure 8. Ovular II, 1980, published in *The Blatant Image II*

An important feature of the larger women’s movement was a distinct feminist art movement, of which feminist photography was a part. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard described the huge impact that feminist art had on contemporary artistic practice this way:

Early feminist art precipitated sweeping and fundamental changes – most of all, the conscious designation of female values and experiences as a legitimate basis for the creation of ‘high’ art; but also, an early challenge to the hegemony of modernist abstraction, which ushered in the postmodern appreciation for

diversity, as well as the return of serious content – both political and personal – to mainstream art.¹²

While Broude and Garrard admit that there is some debate among art historians whether feminist art was distinctly postmodern or anti-postmodern, it is clear that feminist artists in the 1970s, such as Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Rachel Rosenthal, Arlene Raven, and Mary Beth Edelson to name only a few, sought to challenge mainstream assumptions about women and about the artistic work of women, as well as change the parameters on how and which “good art” was judged.

The political viewpoint of feminist artists was visible in their activism as well as in their artwork. Arguing that the art world had a specifically male bias, feminist artists protested the discrimination they saw all around them and created institutions and programs designed to create a community of female artists who could help one another. Some wanted inclusion into the existing art world while others worked at building their own separate institutions. Art critic Lucy Lippard wrote about many of the important institutional changes women artists were initiating in the early 1970s in an article in *Art in America* in 1971.¹³ Lippard highlighted a variety of groups and programs that had already been started by 1971, including the activist group WAR (Women Artists in Revolution), as well as the first feminist art program at a university, started by Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago at the California Institute of the Arts.

Moving women the subject of “high” art to the makers of art was a revolutionary act for feminist artists to begin with. Much of the art created during this period insisted

¹² Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970's History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishing, 1994), 8.

¹³ Lucy R. Lippard, “Sexual Politics: Art Style,” in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 42–49.

that women were best suited to define themselves. Feminists used a wide variety of mediums to present their simultaneously artistic and political viewpoints. Traditional mediums such as painting and sculpture, and more modern mediums, such as performance art and video, were employed in what can be seen as a creative form of consciousness-raising, expressing feminist artist's knowledge of themselves, and thus connecting to the larger understanding of the position of women in society. Especially potent were feminist artists who attempted to take traditionally domestic arts, such as needle point and quilting for instance, and move them into the "high" art world, illustrating simply through their medium the highly gendered nature of what was seen as art and what was seen as craft. Exploring what would later be understood as the social construction of gender, feminist artists in the 1970s were engaging in a larger discourse surrounding the relationship between the self and the way women were socialized to understand themselves and each other. Feminist artists drew important sociopolitical and personal subject matter into their art, making very public statements about the intersection between themselves and the position of women in the world. Once again, the personal and the political were shown to be very interconnected.

While feminist artists put effort into their combined mission of artistic expression and political progress, lesbian artists had a distinctive voice within the movement, attempting to show the unique beauty and importance of their personal and sexual lives. Lesbian photography became a powerful medium through which lesbian feminists could affirm their identities and expand their visibility, while creating images that countered what they saw as exploitative and pornographic images of women that began to dominate American popular culture in the 1970s. Unlike the vast majority of lesbian photography

from previous generations, which documented a subculture that attempted to operate in secret, much of lesbian photography in the 1970s concentrated on a desire for visibility.¹⁴ Yet, as art historian Harmony Hammond has stated, “Lesbian art *is* border art. It demands a gendered and sexual specificity that challenges and disrupts the universality of the modernist mainstream. For this reason, all lesbians artists, no matter what their work is like, are positioned on the margins simply by announcing their sexuality.”¹⁵ Yet, the unconcealed lesbian image held an immense amount of power on several levels. In her book *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians*, Joan E. Biron, a photographer known professionally as JEB and a occasional participant in the southern Oregon photographic community, described how she began the practice of overt lesbian photography: “I had never seen a picture of two women kissing and I wanted to see it. I borrowed a camera, but I didn’t even know anybody else I could ask to pose for it. So I held the camera out at arm’s length and kissed my lover Sharon, and took the picture. That’s my first lesbian photograph.”¹⁶ It is a powerful thing to see one’s identity visually represented in culture. It can affirm identity and desire in ways that are different from non-visual representation. For JEB, her desire to see an image of two women kissing and making that a reality both created positive images for others to see and disrupted the negative message a lack of any representation at all can have. On a personal level we long to see ourselves reflected in ways that affirm our identity, but on a larger scale positive representation can be very

¹⁴ Harmony Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History* (New York: Rizzoli, 2000), 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁶ JEB, *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians* (Washington DC: Glad Hag Books, 1979), 5.

influential in shaping public opinion. The power of images was articulated in the last issue of *The Blatant Image* this way:

In our culture, photographic images profoundly affect every aspect of our lives. As women in a patriarchal culture, it is crucial that we think critically about the interconnections between photographic imagery and life experience ... It is crucial that we realize our power in being able to make our own images. Photographs can convey many things in women's lives, which are not usually seen or things in certain women's lives which should be seen because they are real and have at least a potential effect on all women. Photographs can be a stepping-stone to enlarging our experience, introducing a new way of seeing.¹⁷

Visibility, of culture and of individual lesbians, was an important political function of lesbian-feminist photography. It brought the realities of underrepresented communities lives into view, potentially expanding what it meant to be a woman.

In this day and age it may be difficult to understand how transformative a feminist photography class could be in 1979. When Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove hosted the first "Ovular," a week long "summer camp" at Rootworks, in which women learned a variety of photographic skills and techniques, they believed that putting cameras in the hands of women and teaching them how to use those cameras was an important feminist project (figure 9). They believed that one way to challenge the dominant sexist society, so filled with derogatory and overly sexualized images of women, was to enable feminists to make new kinds of images that expressed their unique realities and concerns. "As we photograph our own lives hour by hour, in our festivals, in our rituals, in our conferences, in our kitchens and bedrooms," Ruth wrote, "we photograph what can be reality for all of us. Our eye sees who we are."¹⁸ The Ovulars, then, were conceived with multiple

¹⁷ Susan Iverson, "A Challenge to Feminists," *The Blatant Image*, no. 3, 1983, 1.

¹⁸ Ruth Mountaingrove, "Making Ourselves Real," *The Blatant Image*, no. 1, 1981, 7.

complementary missions: to build a community of female photographers, to empower individual women through photography, and to conceptualize and produce feminist imagery, in the many forms that it could take, in order to realize a transformation of women's lives.



Figure 9. Ovular II, 1980

Ruth Mountaingrove in particular, along with the other organizers of the first event, Tee Corinne and Carol Newhouse, saw the Ovulars as a way to cement a larger community of women across lines of race, class, and location. Ruth was a rural lesbian photographer, working largely in isolation. The classes she taught at Rootworks brought her stimulation and support, and she offered her students that as well. The women who

came to the Ovulars traveled from all over the country to Rootworks. Some were already active photographers, while others had no experience with photography at all. With cameras always hanging from their necks, the women at the first Ovular explored the ins and outs of Rootworks, and each other, through their viewfinders.

In order to create their feminist images, the women attending Ovulars used several different kinds of cameras, large format twin-lens reflex cameras (those old-fashioned box-like cameras with two lenses on the front) and more modern 35mm single reflex cameras. Decades before the digital camera emerged, learning how to use a manual camera and then to develop negatives and prints, required a variety of skills that took time and practice to hone (figure 10). With a limited number of exposures per roll and the huge expense of film and chemicals making it almost prohibitive, taking photos on a limited budget before the digital age required a lot of planning. One did not have the luxury of picking one good image out of a hundred shots but the political messages that feminist photographers believed in seemed to have been worth the cost. The Ovulars at Rootworks gave both avid photographers and novices a chance to hone their craft, relying on their combined knowledge, insights, creativity, and experience to expand the possibilities of feminist photography and of a community to produce those images.



Figure 10. Inspecting contact sheets

Through their photographs, land dykes captured a variety of important aspects of their lives and their culture. They show a unique lesbian subjectivity and expressed a specific cultural understanding of what lesbian identity meant and how it should be presented. Because photographs are necessarily taken of scenes and subjects that the photographer thinks are important, we can see the priorities of these women through the photographs they produced. Through a survey of Ruth Mountaingrove's photos and the images presented in *The Blatant Image*, it appears that popular photographic subjects fell into a few key categories, including women performing non-traditional labor, lesbian sexuality and intimacy, and the self. Women coming to the Ovulars were less apt to photograph things they saw as mundane, such as domestic labor, although there are of course exceptions. The focus of feminist photography, then, was to illustrate the new possibilities of what it meant to be a woman free from traditional gender roles.

The subject matter Ruth seemed to favor was women engaged in non-traditional labor (figure 11). Women building and working on their homesteads was a particularly compelling photographic subject matter for Ruth. These images challenged conventional understandings of women and gender roles, and they documented the construction of the utopian project in southern Oregon. As the community grew throughout the last half of the 1970s, women built a dazzling array of structures in which to start their new lives. Most often Ruth's photos show women working together in cooperation, building an array of buildings on Rootworks and other women's lands. Images such as this illustrate the camaraderie among women as well as the power of feminist social transformation. Women could work together to learn skills that had previously been denied them solely due to their sex. Through cooperation and skill-sharing the women of the southern Oregon lesbian land community became creative and prolific builders, learning skills that many probably never imagined they would gain before they came to the land. In many instances building their homes and the infrastructure of their rural homesteads from the ground up, one of the most important emancipatory legacies of women's lands is the self-sufficiency that women gained from the necessities of rural separatist life.



Figure 11. Building the Barn at Rootworks, 1979

Many pictures, like the image above, show women topless while performing a variety of tasks. The image does not read as sexual; instead the women's toplessness reads as a sign of their emancipation. Not only were they performing the labor traditionally associated with men, but they were also performing that labor in defiance of patriarchal restrictions on how they should present their bodies. While ignoring the real safety benefits that clothing might afford someone building a structure, these photographs make a strong statement about lesbian-feminist understandings of the connection between bodily restrictions and the larger system of gender inequality. The freedom of embodiment such as this, in addition to the freedom of other forms of embodiment, such as the freedom to engage sexually with other women, was explicitly tied to individual as well as institutional emancipation (figure 12).



Figure 12. Tee Corinne arranging a shot, *Ovular II*, 1980

Lesbian sexuality was also a key subject of the photography on lesbian lands. These photographs challenged both the exploitative pornographic imagery of lesbianism made for straight men and conflicting public perceptions of lesbians as inherently asexual, the dominant images of lesbians for much of the 1970s, but it also presented specific parameters of lesbian sexuality as southern Oregon land dykes defined them. As predominately politically identified lesbians, lesbian sexuality was presented as an embodiment of, and a step toward, creating non-hierarchical and spiritual relationships with each other. In her essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Black feminist, lesbian, poet, mother, warrior Audre Lorde described this perspective on the power of lesbian sexuality this way: “The erotic functions for me in several ways and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person.

The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.”¹⁹ This vision of the power of lesbian sexuality is illustrated through many of the sexual images captured in the southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community.

Tee Corinne was the most famous photographer connected to the southern Oregon lesbian community, as well as the photographer who created the most overtly sexual images. Corinne published a variety artistic and literary works focusing on lesbian sexuality believing that “sexual imagery is important and needed within our lesbian communities.”²⁰ One series of her work presented nude women embracing, many in the midst of having sex (figure 13). The images were “solarized,” with dark areas appearing light and light areas appearing dark. The images are clearly of women in sexual embraces but the solarization obscures the image just enough to give it a touch of mystery.

¹⁹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 56.

²⁰ Tee Corinne, Jacqueline Lapidus, and Margaret Sloan-Hunter, *Yantras of Womanlove* (Tallahassee, Fla.: Naiad Press, 1982); Tee Corinne, *The Poetry of Sex: Lesbians Write the Erotic* (Austin, Tex.: Banned Books, 1992); Tee Corinne, *Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex: A Collection* (Austin, Tex.: Banned Books, 1987); Tee Corinne, *Lovers: Love and Sex Stories* (Austin, Tex.: Banned Books, 1989); Tee Corinne, *Cunt Coloring Book: Drawings* (San Francisco, Calif: Pearlchild Productions, 1975).



Figure 13. *Sinister Wisdom* magazine cover art, by Tee Corinne, 1977

Corinne's artistic work operated on several levels, as she was interested in making images of lesbian sexuality and also imagery of women's body parts, particularly "gynocentric" imagery of vulvas, to comment on the beauty and variety of female bodies. "Vaginal Iconology," as Lisa Tickner referred to this genre of feminist art, sent an important political message in the art of many feminist artists during the 1970s, celebrating "the mark of our 'otherness' and replac[ing] the connotations of inferiority with those of pride."²¹ As Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock wrote in 1981, "The positive assertion of female genitals in so-called vaginal imagery represents for many feminists ... a rejection of male views of woman's body and an assertion of female sexuality. It attacks the idea of women's genitals as mysterious, hidden, and

²¹ Lisa Tickner, "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists Since 1970," in *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement, 1970-1985*, ed. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (London; New York: Pandora, 1987), 268.

threatening.”²² Feminist artist Faith Wilding also wrote about the vaginal iconography employed by many feminist artists:

There’s lots of vagina in our work, but it is not about vaginas. Rather, we are inventing a new form of language radiating a female power which cannot be conveyed in any other way at this time... These images are universal, for they are about being a human body in the world ... a holy body: which knows, thinks, pains, remembers, works, imagines, dreams, yearns, aspires, and which may not be violated. As women artists we are presenting an image of women’s body and spirit as that which cannot and must not be colonized either sexually, economically, or politically.²³

Feminist artists, much like feminist spiritualists, were using body parts in an attempt of illustrate what they understood as a universal female identity, an identity not without some differences but with a distinct similarity.

The most iconic use of this kind of vaginal imagery was Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*. Chicago wrote that her “goal with *The Dinner Party* was consistent with all my efforts in the previous decade. I had been trying to establish a respect for women and women’s art; to forge a new way of expressing women’s experience; and to find a new way to make that art accessible to a large audience.”²⁴ Chicago’s massive installation, unveiled in 1979, consisted of a large triangular table with an open area in the middle. In the middle the names of 999 “either historical or mythological” women were painted in gold on tiles.²⁵ All around the table Chicago set up place settings for 39 women representing women’s historical importance throughout human civilization.

²² Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 126.

²³ Amelia Jones, ed., *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 8.

²⁴ Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Double Day, 1979), 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

Chicago was attempting to give them each a seat at the metaphorical table. Chicago, and over 400 assistants, created table runners and place settings for these women, highlighting the impact each had had. Every plate was unique to the woman it was inviting to the table. All were made individually, by Chicago and her assistants, with a motif Chicago had used repeatedly, a variation on a “butterfly.” It was a pattern that was unmistakably vaginal.

While much of the gynocentric art made in the 1970s was not, as Wilding put it, about vaginas, per se, much of Tee Corinne’s art was. This is not to say that it wasn’t political at the same time but Corinne made gynocentric imagery that in many cases foregrounded lesbian sexuality and the variety of the anatomy that united all women. This can be seen in the way vaginas were presented by Corinne. Her work was more literal and less abstract than Judy Chicago’s. She took many close-up photographs and made line drawings of vulvas, attempting to illustrate the sheer variety and beauty of that part of women’s bodies. Even when the images were subject to large amounts of manipulation, as in the images of vaginas in her book *Yantras of Womanlove*, which were overlaid and arranged in a kaleidoscope pattern that forces the viewer to take a few seconds to figure out what the collage is made of, the subject matter is still about the beauty she saw in female genitalia. Here women’s bodies are celebrated outside of male controlled images created for their titillation.

Tee Corinne’s *Cunt Coloring Book*, in particular, has remained a hallmark of her work. Corinne’s drawings are unexpectedly blatant in their imagery, as part of her intent was to show the sheer variety of actual women’s labia. In her work, simple line drawings of female genitalia could almost be mistaken for the shape of flowers, in much the same

way Georgia O'Keefe's paintings of flowers have the opposite implication, if not for the larger context they are presented in. Corinne's images in *The Cunt Coloring Book* accomplish several things at once, serving both an informative and artistic purpose. Her intention was to have the drawings used in sex education groups, wanting the images to be "lovely and informative, to give pleasure and affirmation" to women seeking to better understand their own bodies.

Unlike Tee Corinne's photographs, Ruth Mountaingrove's subject matter was rarely graphically sexual in nature. She did photograph countless nude women, in a variety of poses and actions, but the connection between women in her photos can be best described as intimate. Just as with photographs depicting blatant lesbian sexuality, this depiction of intimacy between women is intensely quiet and revolutionary at the same time. Ruth Mountaingrove's photo of Tee Corinne and her lover evokes the intimacy and tender affection between women that was central to many of the photos produced on women's land (figure 14). With a camera hanging around Corinne's neck, as if she has just taken a break from shooting, the two sit on the ground, taking a moment to themselves. The image centers on an unnamed lover embracing Corinne from the side. The main subjects are in the foreground, crisp and clear, while the bucolic countryside in the background and all around them is out of focus, emphasizing their togetherness and their isolation from all that surrounds them. They are undoubtedly nestled somewhere in women's land, and yet they are temporarily occupied only with each other. Unlike many of the images produced at the Ovulars, the subjects are fully clothed, dressed in layers of flannel and wool despite the sun shining on them. Their intimacy lies not in an overt statement of lesbian sexuality but instead in the delicate and intimate connection between

their touching faces. With their eyes closed, they momentarily shut out the world in order to focus their attention on enjoying each other's closeness.



Figure 14. Tee and her current significant other by Ruth Mountaingrove, 1977

After the success of several Ovulars, Ruth put the second part of Jean's plan for her into action. Actual production of the first issue of *The Blatant Image* didn't get under way until the spring of 1981, presumably once the spring solstice issue of *WomanSpirit Magazine* had gone off to the printers. Photographer Lynn Davis and visitor Jan Phillips joined Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove as well as lovers Tee Corinne and Caroline Overman, as they all sorted through the six hundred photos that had been submitted by over one hundred women from across the country.²⁶ Some of the piles of photos doubtlessly came from participants of the previous summer's Ovulars, as well as from

²⁶ Mountaingrove et al., "The Blatant Image: Her Story."

other photographers connected to the southern Oregon lesbian community through the growing social network of lesbian feminists all across the country.

Each annual issue of *The Blatant Image* began with a whole new editorial process, even though the Mountaingroves remained central to the production of every issue.

Women from the immediate southern Oregon lesbian community, as well as women from all over the country, submitted the photographs that filled the pages of the magazine and populated the editorial and production group. Some women involved in the production had previous experience with photography, while some did not. A few had previous experience with publications and layout, while most did not. With or without any experience, volunteers came to Rootworks to assist in the creative and transformative process of publishing a magazine of feminist photography.

To create the third issue in 1983, the editorial team began by discussing the ideological foundations of the magazine itself. The group consisted of the Mountaingroves, Belle and Marjorie Shalom, Pat Gargaetas, and Susan Iverson, most of whom had previously attended at least one of Ruth Mountaingrove's Ovulars. Together they started the production process from scratch, with an understanding that they, as a group and as individuals, could question or argue for any decision. They asked perhaps unanswerable questions of each other, like what makes a photograph feminist or not, and whether or not that definition had to include a photographer that identified as a feminist. If indeed the photographer needed to identify as a feminist, then perhaps the female subject matter needed to have a relationship to feminism as well. What if the subject was a woman from another country, who the photographer had never actually spoken to? Could the editors come to understand the essence of her politics just from a photograph?

Questions such as these went on and on and on, with hours of meetings recorded and then transcribed, to allow for further discussion later on. At the core of this process was an intentional transparency and group discussion that was a direct heir of consciousness-raising. Just as many of these women had come to their own lesbian identity while sitting in circles of other women, so too did the editorial group work out the major decisions in a group format.²⁷

The barn at Rootworks was the location where photographs were both developed and selected for publication. It was also the subject of numerous photographs itself. Built by the Mountaingroves and many helpers in 1979, it was the largest building project the Mountaingroves ever undertook. Never really serving the traditional purpose of a barn, but described as such presumably to avoid hassles with building codes, the “barn” looked more like a rustic lodge, with a narrow porch that wrapped around two of its sides. It stood two stories tall, with square windows lining all four walls on the bottom floor and three large windows in each of the two eaves, which flooded light into the upper floor. The building let Jean and Ruth, and those who worked inside with them, enjoy the beauty of the forest surrounding them. The structure was built to house the creative and business efforts of the Mountaingroves. They were proud to have a “woman-built” barn that served as a monument to their work inside and outside of Rootworks itself. In honor of the long line of lesbians from which they felt they had descended, they nicknamed the barn “Natalie Barney,” after the famous American expatriate, who, during her association with the La Belle Époque in Paris, notoriously seduced an array of women.²⁸

²⁷ Belle Shalom and Marjorie Lightness Shalom, “The Blatant Image in Progress,” *The Blatant Image*, 1983, 4.

²⁸ Kleiner, “Doin’ It for Themselves,” 112.

Simultaneously situating the production of their first issue in nature and in a long history of lesbian publication, the collective stated that the issue had been “put together under trees by a roaring Romaine Brook in Natalie Barney, as we affectionately call our barn at Rootworks.”²⁹ Romaine Brooks, was, not coincidentally, both the name of their brook and the name of a famous American painter who was the long-time lesbian lover of Natalie Barney.³⁰

The first editorial collective described their process in the first issue. First they had to sort through hundreds of photos. Perhaps covering some of the numerous windows in the barn with cardboard to block out the abundant autumn sunshine, the women would have then set photographs all along the line of small narrow shelves that ran the length of the building. This way they could see some of the images together. Each photographer could submit up to five photos, and so perhaps the editors would lay out the photos as a group and decide which were the strongest. They debated the merits of intent versus execution. Was a photograph that was poorly composed but had an important subject more important to include than one that was composed and printed immaculately but less significant? The plywood covered walls were also a good space to tack up photos, perhaps making the production span from floor to ceiling. When space got crowded on the ground floor they could have climbed up the aluminum ladder that served as the permanent stairway to the second floor. Sitting on pads, they might continue

²⁹ Mountaingrove et al., “The Blatant Image: Her Story.”

³⁰ For more on Brooks and Barney see: Tirza True Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

to debate. What did “good composition” mean after all? Was that just another male construct they had been fooled into believing?³¹

While some of the women continued sorting through photographs inside, Jean and Marjorie completed the manual labor that Rootworks constantly required.³² The time-consuming labor of keeping up the homestead did not stop just because they had a magazine to produce. It was fall, and the harsh winter ahead of them demanded preparation, which added to their workload. In the fall of 1983, the Mountaingroves and their guests completed a long list of projects beyond their editorial work: “getting a brick walk laid in the greenhouse, wood stacking, running plastic pipe into the new reservoir for water, cleaning bricks, repairing roofs, digging mulch into the potato patch, drying pears.”³³ That was in addition to the daily cleaning and seasonal labor that was required to keep all in good repair. After all, dead leaves, so numerous in the fall, can have a detrimental effect on a porch or a roof if left for long. So as one group worked inside, one worked outside as well; each was a necessary and integral piece of the combined project of rural homesteading and feminist transformation.

Articles and photographs included in *The Blatant Image* included a variety of themes and subject matter. Calling for submissions to the first issue in a variety of feminist publications, including a highly successful small ad in the back pages of *Ms. Magazine*, the collective simply requested “practical, personal, aesthetic, critical, and technical articles dealing with feminist photography, together with photographs to

³¹ Ibid.

³² Shalom and Shalom, “The Blatant Image in Progress.”

³³ Ibid.

illustrate them. Women photographers are invited to send a favorite photograph of theirs along with about 250 words telling how it felt to take the photo, how or why it was taken, what the photo means to her, and other relevant ideas.”³⁴ It was not explicitly a lesbian magazine, let alone a separatist magazine, the only requirement for submission being that the photographer was a woman, so the magazine included a few images of men as well as women. This set *The Blatant Image* apart from the Mountaingrove’s other publication, *WomanSpirit*. Clearly the lack of an overt lesbian or separatist slant to the magazine attracted a wider variety of submissions from a wider variety of feminist photographers than otherwise would have been the case. Articles presented an array of information, from historical pieces on women photographers, technical how-to articles, and memoirs written by female photographers. Some photographs also included explanations of the imagery presented, while other photographs were given no explanation, leaving the image to speak for itself.

In comparison to the photographs produced at the Ovulars, the images in *The Blatant Image* presented an expansive view of women, including images of women that acknowledged the sheer variety of women’s experiences based on intersections of race, class, nation, and a variety of other categories. Photographs in the first issue included a self portrait of a topless woman with a buzz cut, a close up photograph of a belly with a cesarean scar, an image of a Cuna Indian woman from Nicaragua, and portraits of two battered women, just to name a few. By the second issue they began calling for more specific submissions, explicitly stating they were, “very interested in printing work that addresses the visibility of women of color, by women of color, disabled women by

³⁴ Ad, Folder 2, Box 64, The Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

disabled women, older women by older women, lesbians by lesbians.”³⁵ After commenting that the magazine was published in a rural setting yet actually documented the urban lives of women more holistically, the collective wrote, “We looked for images that would reflect the diversity of our lives, portray distinctively female visions and experiences, claim non-traditional spaces and relationships for women, provide an impact and inspiration to the viewer that would serve as catalyst for positive change.”³⁶ Still interested in operating within a biologically defined community of woman, there is a paradox between their focus on pictures of women’s differences and diversity, including images of men created by women, co-existing with the strong desire for the photographers to only be women.

Many of the women who submitted images to the magazine, as well as many of the women participating in the Ovulars, were experimenting with the possibilities of portraiture. The call for submissions to the second issue also included reference to interest in self-portraits, couched under a more general call for photographs that explored, what they termed “invisible images.” These images were said to focus on “scars, birth marks, mastectomies,” for example, as a way to illustrate “the span of women’s lives from birthing to old age.”³⁷ These images explored what women’s bodies really looked like in order to express their lived experiences and to underline the chasm between reality and how women were visually represented in a sexist culture. Women appeared naked in a variety of settings, some of the photographs evoking confidence and joy, while others

³⁵ Call for Submissions to the Blatant Image, June 7, 1982, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Box 64, Folder 1, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene.

³⁶ Mountaingrove et al., “The Blatant Image: Her Story,” 5.

³⁷ Call for Submissions, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Box 64, Folder 1.

clearly revealing pain and discomfort to the audience. In an incredibly powerful image taken by Ruth, a woman, J. Wattles, is presented shirtless with one intact breast and a mastectomy scar where her other breast had once been.³⁸ Wattles is presented staring straight into the camera, with a look on her face that can only be described as a mixture of self-assuredness and resolve. Here images of women's bodies are used effectively to illustrate the things that are usually not spoken of but that shape women's experiences of their bodies and in the world.

Ruth also included a self-portrait in the second issue of *The Blatant Image*. A close-up of her face with largely undistinguishable text faintly overlaying her image, Ruth's self-portrait in the magazine does not express the confidence that is so clear in the photographs she took one year later. Instead, she chose to include a photograph that references her greatest fear with old age, losing her mind. Titled, "I have nightmares of senility," the image is of a close up of Ruth's face, with text superimposed across its entirety. This photograph represents Ruth's continued willingness to be open with and engage with her larger feminist photography community, in the same model of consciousness-raising that continued to serve her so well in southern Oregon.³⁹ The image also represents how her worries had changed over time. As she grew into older age, Ruth's relationship to her body and her mind understandably changed, with the worries associated with growing older understandably taking center stage to some degree.

³⁸ Ruth Mountaingrove, "Portrait of J Wattles", *The Blatant Image II*, 1982, 48.

³⁹ Ruth Mountaingrove, "I Have Nightmares of Senility," *The Blatant Image*, 1982, 18.

After completing that first issue Ruth and Jean publically stated that they were done with the project, hoping that other women would join Tee, Jan, and Caroline on the next issue. But instead it was only Jean who stepped aside. Writing in the second issue of *The Blatant Image* Ruth was vague about Jean's reasons for leaving as an editor. "Last year Jean was angry about the production of No. 1 and shook her head "No" to doing another issue." Yet, it was clear that Ruth wanted to pass it on and could not bear to let the magazine end. "I said I wasn't willing to do another one either," she wrote, "Tee A. Corrine, Caroline Overman, and Jan Phillips said 'Yes' they were interested. Yet this year Jan couldn't get back from the East Coast, and Tee, Caroline, and I decided to go ahead again."⁴⁰ Feminist photography was clearly Ruth's passion and she was unwilling to let a vehicle for photographic consciousness-raising end, while women's spirituality was the creative project that Jean was more engaged with, not to mention the project that was presumably more of a financial support to the couple. After all, both *WomanSpirit Magazine* and the *Ovulars* consistently operated with a small profit for the Mountaingroves, while *The Blatant Image* barely ever broke even financially.⁴¹ After numerous attempts to pass on editorial duties failed, including one to recruit a group of women in the Bay Area, Ruth once again joined the editorial collective in 1983.⁴²

After 1983, however, the magazine and the *Ovulars* ceased. One reason is that Ruth Mountaingrove's life went through a series of drastic changes in the early 1980s. Exhausted by their ten years of work on *WomanSpirit Magazine*, *The Blatant Image*, and

⁴⁰ Ruth Mountaingrove, "How We Did It," *The Blatant Image II*, 1982.

⁴¹ Letter, 10 Oct 1981, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Box 64, Folder 10, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, OR.

⁴² Mountaingrove, "How We Did It."

various other publications, and having decided to end their romantic relationship after ten years, the couple separated, effectively ending all publications they were involved in. Ruth Mountaingrove moved out of Rootworks and southern Oregon in 1985. Moving down the coast to Arcata, California, Ruth enrolled in an MFA program at Humboldt State University, with an emphasis on photography, of course.⁴³ Her rural homesteading project in southern Oregon had ended, but her personal commitment to her photographic work and to activity within a larger community of female photographers, as well as her commitment to self-transformation and feminism, did not. That kind of transformation, so rooted in the connection between the personal and the political, may never actually end. Reflecting on the soul searching she was once again doing due to her separation from Jean, Ruth revealed the difference between her outward appearance of feminist actualization, as personified in the self-portraits from her 60th birthday the year before, and the difficult realities of life. She wrote to a friend, “I remember how hard it was to become 60 – It’s why I had a party – 60 in this society is down the drain. So I created a positive accepting stance but I was far from feeling it – it is a scary time, life is 2/3 over. What now?”⁴⁴ Ruth’s time in southern Oregon had undoubtedly transformed her life and perspective on the world in a myriad of amazing ways. It had not, however, eliminated all the problems of life, love, and getting older. While her evolution from housewife to lesbian separatist could be interpreted as a conversion or rebirth narrative described in a variety of back-to-the-land texts, Ruth Mountaingrove’s evolution on women’s land

⁴³ “Historical Note,” *Guide to the Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, 1950-1999*, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://nwda.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv51562>.

⁴⁴ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974),” [letter in inside cover], Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Box 9, Special Collections University of Oregon Knight Library.

included an overtly political transformation in addition to a variety of deeply personal changes, a transformation that was ongoing even once she left rural southern Oregon.⁴⁵

Photography was, for Ruth and many lesbian feminists living in southern Oregon in the 1970s and 1980s, a potent vehicle for self-expression and a way to express a radical political critique of culture through a very personal and intimate medium. In the first issue of *The Blatant Image*, Ruth summed up why she had gone to such effort to remain an active and engaged photographer: “Because taking a picture of something means you think it is important in some way, photography can help us explore our feminist values and expand the range of who is being seen. Our hope is to change the ways women see the world and, secondarily, the ways the world sees women [emphasis original].”⁴⁶ In spite of the huge effort it took to create publications while living rural lives, without amenities such as endless streams of electricity, the women publishing *The Blatant Image* were attempting to create connections with feminists outside of their direct community and to shape discourse about the feminist social and political transformation of society.

In the first issue of *The Blatant Image* Ruth articulated her vision for the magazine in an article titled, “Making Ourselves Real.” This statement gets to the heart of all of her photographic projects—her understanding of the power of photography—and the transformation that had occurred in her life, thanks in part to the power of her art. In it, she wrote, “What we choose to photograph becomes our reality. And, when published, not just ours, but other women’s as well as men’s. When we photograph women as we

⁴⁵ Examples of the conversion or rebirth narrative can be seen in the numerous memoirs of those that went “back-to-the-land.” For a well-written example see Eleanor Agnew, *Back From the Land: How Young Americans Went to Nature in the 1970s, and Why They Came Back* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005).

⁴⁶ Mountaingrove et al., “The Blatant Image: Her Story,” 4.

see them, as no one has seen them before, we make these images real—we change the way of seeing and in so doing, we change the world.”⁴⁷ Here is a statement about the revolutionary implications of photography that Ruth had experienced first hand in her own life and in the lives of those women she had taught and learned from, whether on a personal level at Rootworks or through the larger discourse created by *The Blatant Image*. This statement can be taken even further, however, describing the overall project the Mountaingroves and their community were engaged in. All of their efforts, their spirituality and even their building projects, were aimed at creating a new and more authentic reality for themselves and other women.

⁴⁷ Ruth Mountaingrove, “Making Ourselves Real,” 7. Emphasis original.

CHAPTER IV

JEAN AND RUTH MOUNTAINGROVE

After her preliminary visit with Jean at Mountain Grove in the summer of 1971, Ruth returned to the East Coast. She then packed up her daughter and arranged for them to get a ride back to the West Coast, returning to start her life anew at Mountain Grove in early October of 1971.¹ As she drove cross-country, Ruth's mind was on what it meant to be a lesbian. She was not entirely new to romantic relationships with women, having had several female lovers since her split with her now ex-husband, but giving up her life on the East Coast and moving across country to be with Jean meant that she would be taking on the identity of a lesbian, whatever that meant. Almost ten years later author Adrienne Rich would come up with a famous definition that illustrates how many lesbian-feminists, like Ruth, came to view the expansiveness of lesbian identity. Rich wrote of a,

lesbian continuum to include a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support... we begin to grasp breaths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of "lesbianism."²

¹ "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984)," 22 Oct 1971; Kleiner, "Doin' It for Themselves," 43.

² Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (July 1, 1980): 648.

This definition of lesbianism offered a political dimension to the identity, as well as a sexual one. Lesbianism was not just about sex; it was about the whole focus of an individual's life.

For Ruth then, choosing to become a lesbian was intimately tied to her overall feminist politics and fit into an expansive vision of radical sexual politics. "I guess the prime question in my head is what is lesbianism," she wrote, "and how can anyone break out of our societal model to one relating into a more inclusive love relationship without all the pain and jealousy that goes with monogamy?"³ Adopting lesbianism, and moving to Oregon to be with Jean, did not mean that Ruth desired monogamy. Unhappy with the traditional models of relationship and family they had been raised in, Jean and Ruth set out to change the traditional parameters of love relationships, continually reevaluating what their relationship to each other could and should look like. The Mountaingroves saw an undesirable connection between monogamy, control, and eventual stagnation of desire and thus agreed that a non-monogamous relationship between the two of them was desirable.

Ruth had a radical vision of relationships before she even moved to Oregon, one that she would continue to develop and reimagine over time. For the Mountaingroves, the connection between intimacy, monogamy, and sexuality was not a given but something to be explored and reimaged through a political lens and through their intimate lives. This reimagining was steeped in the radical feminist ideology circulating in the early 1970s, and we can see an attempt to live out a variety of feminist ideals in the Mountaingroves' relationship in southern Oregon. Their relationship, a fruitful business

³ "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984)," 4 Oct 1971.

partnership that produced feminist theory for the public through their publications, was also an intimate project of lesbian-feminist praxis (figure 15).

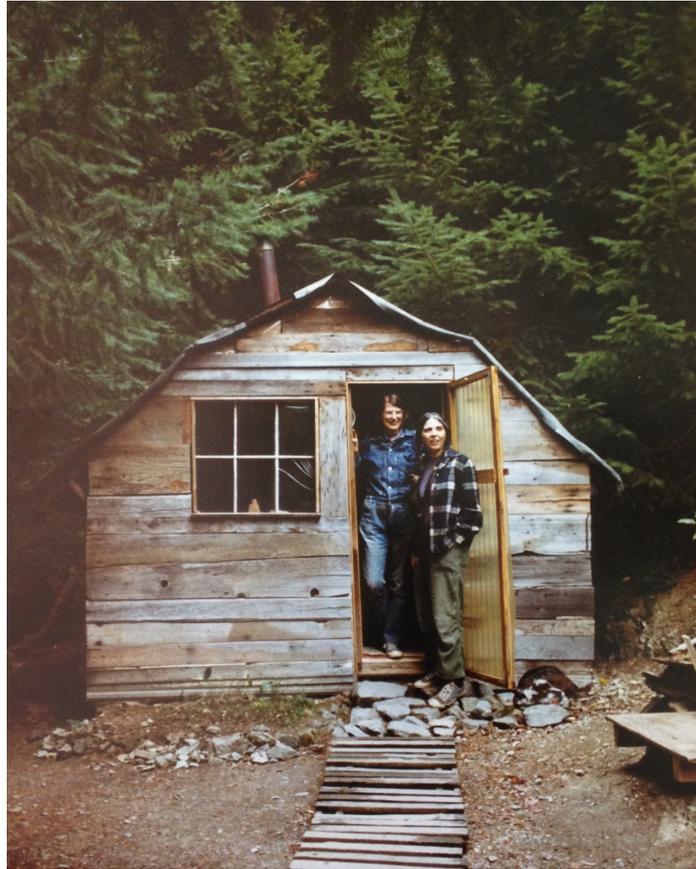


Figure 15. Ruth and Jean in front of their cabin at Golden

Theirs was a radical project of self-transformation as well – a radical focus on the individual if you will – that blurred the line between the personal and the political. Ruth and Jean were interested in building women’s lands, and they were interested in building a community of women, but at the heart of these interests was a need to create a space for their personal transformations. Consciousness-raising, after all, asked women to change the world by changing themselves. Consciousness-raising’s psychological underpinnings, as historian Ellen Herman has observed, “helped to construct the feminist.

It offered resources with which to support the ideas and actions of the women's movement: to resist the separation of private and public, to bridge the yawning chasms between the psychic and the social, the self and the other."⁴ The Mountaingroves built on this psychological foundation to move their relationship toward a feminist model of intimacy, but they also employed psychological language to explain, or justify, when their actions or feelings did not conform to their new feminist ideals and lesbian ethics. In practice, their efforts to transform themselves by eliminating the line between the political and the personal in their day-to-day relationships opened a space for conflict with each other, their children, and the members of their larger communities.

While the project of shaping their relationship was all encompassing at times, Ruth and Jean did not live alone. In fact, they were engaged in a variety of communities, such as the intentional community they joined when they first moved to southern Oregon and the lesbian community they helped to develop, as well as living, off and on, with some of their own children. Ruth and Jean's personal relationship with each other, their children, and their community all highlight the deficits and the payoffs of putting new radical ideologies into practice. Their publications articulated both lesbian-feminist ideology and a public vision of their lives that made them exemplars of actualized lesbian feminists. Nevertheless, discussions and images of their personal lives in *WomanSpirit Magazine* and *The Blatant Image*, while not making their relationship seem perfect by any means, did not give a full story of their time together. Even though their projects were always grounded in a deeply personal feminist ethic, and the Mountaingroves were not afraid to expose the difficulties of connecting their ideals to their lives in their

⁴ Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 280.

publications, Ruth's diaries better illuminate the daily, at times mundane, ways the couple shaped their lives around their political beliefs. The Mountaingroves constantly analyzed and adjusted their personal relationships in order to bring their lives into agreement with their politics. Rather than making the personal political, they illustrate how the political was made personal among 1970s lesbian-feminists.

Ruth Mountaingrove's extensive diaries were a therapeutic outlet for the frustrations of daily life and an intentional documentation of Ruth's feminist project. Because of this, and because we only have Ruth's perspective of their private relationship, our understanding of the intimate lives of the Mountaingroves is unfortunately one-sided, but her diaries are still very illuminating. Hoping to publish them some day, Ruth herself believed they presented "a feminist journey interesting of itself and of interest to other women."⁵ While her desire to publish them may have shaded her entries, what she chose to include and not include shows us where her feminist projects, and her priorities, were going. Ruth did not shy away from discussing many of the uncomfortable truths of her life in her diary, including her own outbursts of anger, for example. Those currently invested in preserving a certain history of lesbian-feminist life in southern Oregon – for instance those who have dedicated their lives to this community and its vision of women's culture – understandably might want to paint reality in a more palatable way; however, the hard realities of life are what make Ruth's story so important. The project of the feminist transformation of self was not clean cut but instead was entangled with all of the messy aspects of life. For the Mountaingroves, the personal project of feminist liberation was as much about personal recovery and

⁵ "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984)," 13 Oct 1984.

discovery as it was about larger feminist changes; indeed, the two were dependent on each other. This personal project included facing the aspects of their lives they wanted to heal from, as well as shaping their futures. Immersed in feminist spiritual and artistic projects, and using language and ideals that came from popular psychoanalytic theory and feminist consciousness-raising, the Mountaingroves attempted to practice what they preached, with varying degrees of success (figure 16).



Figure 16. Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove

What does a model of intimate relationships actually look like outside of patriarchal influences? What is kept and what is discarded? Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove's answer to these questions was one that connected personal conduct with political conviction, and connecting these two things was something they worked on routinely. In order for them to get a deeper understanding of how their relationship fit

into a larger feminist model, they embraced the study of an array of radical feminist writings, modeling their relationship on what they were reading. In the approach they took to living their feminist politics, many of the overarching answers they sought came from a variety of feminist theorists, including Jill Johnston, Mary Daly, Kate Millet, and Adrienne Rich.

After meeting lesbian writer Jill Johnston while on a road trip through California in 1976, Ruth immediately bought all three of her books.⁶ In Johnston's most famous book, *Lesbian Nation*, Ruth would have read a clear articulation of what radical lesbian feminists believed to be the revolutionary power of lesbian relationships. "When theory and practice come together we'll have the revolution," Johnston wrote in 1973, "Until all women are lesbians there will be no true political revolution."⁷ The work Ruth was doing to figure out the intersections of her personal and political lives became grounded in this politicized lesbian-feminism.

In order to better define her new gay identity, Ruth juxtaposed her vision of lesbianism against what she knew it was not, namely the "old gay" style of homosexuality, one modeled, according to Ruth, on heterosexuality:

The new gay women are into including other women into a group. They are turned off by the butch-femme role playing because they see that relating is complicated enough without all the games. They are also largely turned off to the bar scene because that too is a replay of the heterosexual life ... But they do recognize that in the repressive society we live in, learning who is gay and who is not is dangerous business and that

⁶ "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1974-1980)," 15 March 1976.

⁷ Jill Johnston, "The Myth of the Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," in *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey Escoffier (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 2003), 504.

the bar scene is relatively safe, though since it is male and macho run that safety becomes questionable.⁸

Here the “old gay” lesbian scene is gendered male and connected to danger and macho attitudes. Making a clear differentiation between “new gay women” and “old gay women,” Ruth identified the origin of the difference in the Women’s Liberation Movement:

New gay women are coming out of the women’s liberation movement and they are coming from a different place than old gay women. They have probably been in consciousness-raising, they have a woman’s consciousness, they are familiar with ideas in the movement. They may believe as I did and do, that being or having all your identity coming down from men is a bad scene. The women need to put all their energies into relating to their sisters. The feminists advocate separation and this may lead to gayness, to a physical relating, but it could also lead to celibacy.⁹

Lesbian identity, then, was not exclusively rooted in sexual attraction, but instead required relating in a variety of meaningful ways to other women in order to become “woman-identified.”

Ruth’s understanding of “old gays” is in line with contemporary understandings of the relationship between lesbian generations between the 1950s and the 1970s. Being “woman-identified” could lead to lesbianism but it could also lead to celibacy, thus the identity was only secondarily about sexuality. In 1987, lesbian writer Joan Nestle reflected back on the gap between lesbian generations in her essay, “Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s.” She recollected,

We lesbians from the fifties made a mistake in the early seventies: we allowed our lives to be trivialized and reinterpreted by feminists who did not share our culture. The slogan ‘Lesbianism is the practice and

⁸ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984),” 4 Oct 1971.

⁹ Ibid.

feminism is the theory' was a good rallying cry, but it cheated our history... I shared both worlds and know how respectable feminism made me feel, how less dirty, less ugly, less butch and femme.¹⁰

Nestle goes on to argue that part of the feminist objection to butch-femme was not only that it mirrored heterosexuality but that it made the sexuality of lesbians all too visible. As Kathy Rudy asserted, “radical feminists made it clear...that lesbianism was as much about politics as it was about sex. Although sex-positive attitudes certainly existed in pockets of lesbian discourse,” as it did in most of the private writings of Ruth Mountaingrove, a “skepticism about sexual activity dominated much of radical feminism.”¹¹ Ruth and Jean’s relationship, as opposed to the butch-femme lesbian relationships Nestle wrote about, was not necessarily grounded in a deep sexual magnetism. Sexuality was not the only route they saw toward a deep emotional and spiritual connection, the real goal of their relationship.

The Mountaingroves questioned all aspects of the dominant heterosexual monogamous relationship model they were raised to reenact. They began their sexual relationship in 1971 mindful of the problems they had experienced in the past and open to revolutionary relationship models, such as non-monogamy. In the midst of her move to Oregon, Ruth wrote of the main difficulties she saw in open, non-monogamous relationships. “The problem is that people are not polite and there are times when you open up a one to one relationship only to find that you are not three but two again and you yourself are cut out. There has to be a great deal of security to risk vulnerability –

¹⁰ Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1987), 105–106.

¹¹ Kathy Rudy, “Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory,” *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (April 1, 2001): 27.

you have to feel good in yourself, and like yourself in order to love someone else.”¹² She went on, “The problem here is that any closed relationship will stagnate after time. And if both partners are wrapped in each other one of them is going to want out eventually in all probability.” In order to avoid these problems, the Mountaingroves needed to develop the perfect combination of closeness and separateness, with trust as the basis of their connection. This need for security was something that Ruth repeatedly invoked over her years with Jean. What scared Ruth most about an open relationship was what she perceived as an increased threat of abandonment, while at the same time she craved a relationship in which she and her partner would be free to develop themselves individually.

This balance between individualism and intimacy also needed to include an understanding of the dynamics of power in relationships. Shulamith Firestone and other radical feminist theorists posited that heterosexual relationships in general were grounded in an unequal balance of power.¹³ In order to rid relationships of this inequality, one of the central goals of feminist relationships had to be to make all aspects of relationships equal. Other feminist theory supported this understanding of heterosexual relationships. In writer Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, Millet connected sex to oppression, arguing that heterosexual sex was grounded in “dominance and subordination.”¹⁴ Indeed, unequal power relations had characterized Jean and Ruth’s previous sexual relationships with men and so this understanding of power resonated with them, and they did not want to

¹² “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984),” 4 Oct 1971.

¹³ Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 96.

¹⁴ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984),” 5 Jan 1973.; Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 24.

replicate those relations in their new bond. While they saw unequal power as the foundation of heterosexual relationships, this was the only model of intimacy they had been exposed to their whole lives, and they understood that eradicating the influences of patriarchy in their own lives was a complicated project. According to Ruth's diary, the Mountaingroves devoted considerable energy to eliminating unequal power in their relationship. In one incident, in which Ruth felt rejected by Jean, Ruth went so far as to question the power a "no" has in a relationship. They discussed "the power of negativity," with Ruth asking, "why a no carries so much more weight – so much more power than a yes – Why negativity is a position of power."¹⁵

This model of intimacy, with relationships that needed to be open, not possessive, and equal in a variety of ways, was a delicate balancing act that required a lot of energy from any two people. This was especially challenging as they were also attempting to gain control and power in other aspects of their lives. A paradox was created between wanting to claim power and emotions, such as anger, which they felt had been routinely denied them under patriarchy, and yet coming into their relationship understanding that they each had different strengths but could not use those strengths to oppress the other person. In their magazines the Mountaingroves included few public accounts of the work they were doing in their relationship around power. In the Summer 1977 issue, with the theme of "Anger, Strength, and Power," Jean wrote an essay that chronicled the work she had done so far to understand her relationship to power.¹⁶ The article highlights her work within the collective that produced *WomanSpirit*, only mentioning Ruth as the person

¹⁵ "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1974-1980)," 25 April 1974.

¹⁶ Jean Mountaingrove, "My Struggle With Power," *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Summer 1977, 29–30.

who “sustained” her, stating vaguely that she had “Learned much about myself and about the world from testing myself in relationship to her,” adding that, “That is a book in itself.”¹⁷ Accounts such as this highlight the productive work both Jean and Ruth were doing to make their relationship fit their ideology. The actions and feelings they had that conformed to their political identities were made public. This included discussing the imprint that patriarchy had made on them and the ways they were successfully dealing with that imprint. What did not necessarily make it into publication were the obstacles to the progression of their political selves, in other words, when their actions were out of step, or conflicted with, the politics they espoused.

First living together at Mountain Grove community, Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove developed their personal and sexual relationship in tandem with the development of their spirituality. It was not until Ruth visited Mountain Grove that the two consummated their sexual relationship.¹⁸ While exploring the hills around their new home, the Mountaingroves discovered a “sacred” grove of Madrones surrounding a pond. Ruth wrote of the development of their spirituality and sexual relationship on March 4, 1972: “So gradually the beginnings of a woman’s religion began to evolve. At first we thought of the grove as an empty place. We would go there at full moon for wild sexualness but we were told no intercourse. We have since worked this out to mean no deliberate planned intercourse – if we should be flowing and the flow should lead us there then it would just happen.”¹⁹ While it is unclear who restricted their sexual

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984),” 22 Oct 1971.

¹⁹ Ibid., 4 March 1972.

activities in the grove, perhaps the leader of the community or even Mother Nature speaking to them, it is clear that early on Jean and Ruth found a strong link between their sexual connection with each other and their spiritual connection to nature. At the grove, “We were worshippers together. We would kiss each other – sacred kisses in the sacred place.” Expanding on the sacredness of nature, Ruth continued, “Woman is a deep connection with the unconscious. Woman is a deep connection with the earth. Wilderness is a deep part of her nature. Woman’s sexuality is the sum of herself. She learns about her sexuality inwardly and outwardly – outwardly from others, inwardly inside herself.”²⁰

Discourses on sexuality in the women’s land community, like other aspects of the women’s culture they were creating, were connected to a belief in the femaleness of nature and the earth. Historian Catherine Kleiner has written on the erotics of lesbian land, connecting the gendering of the land as female with lesbian sexuality, showing that in addition to gendering “nature as a woman,” land lesbians, “became nature’s lovers (both figuratively and literally).”²¹ This was a particularly salient aspect of the sexuality of Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove. This discourse, much like the spiritual and artistic culture, also centered on the value, beauty, and naturalness of women’s bodies. Discussion of lesbian sexuality on women’s lands began as a central part of the larger political project of women’s liberation through separatism. With a political goal of uniting all women in a ‘universal sisterhood,’ female anatomy connected all women and also made them understand each other sexually. As long as a woman’s body had prescribed anatomy, they embraced the variety and complexity of women’s physical

²⁰ Ibid., 31 May 1972.

²¹ Kleiner, “Nature’s Lovers: The Erotics of Lesbian Land Communities in Oregon, 1974 - 1984.”

bodies, asserting that a variety of shapes and sizes were natural and important, as well as sexually attractive.

This spiritual and sexual connection also incorporated other aspects of the emerging women's culture the Mountaingroves practiced and envisioned. "Jean spoke of a woman's music. I heard flutes ... but Jean said it was something more primitive like moaning, deep, deep as is eros. This seems right and the grove of trees predates masculine religion with images of father, son, jesus. So women's music comes from deep within."²² While this type of connection between music, primitivism, and women's religion was clear throughout the pages of *WomanSpirit Magazine*, the connection to eros, or erotic love, was less present in the pages of the magazine. Here, linked to their personal relationship, they connected all of these things together under a larger conception of intimacy.

This highly gendered perspective of lesbian sexuality disseminated by lesbian feminists became dominant in lesbian-feminist circles in the 1970s, presenting very specific parameters of lesbian sexual activity as natural and normal. As sociologist Arlene Stein described it, lesbian feminism "created a new cultural repertoire of desire, a new set of sexual 'scripts' that would guide sexual desire and behavior."²³ These specific shared social understandings of lesbian-feminist sexual parameters created spoken and unspoken boundaries for appropriate sexual expression. Yet, this perspective on lesbian sexuality was not the only perspective circulating or being enacted, and lesbian feminists did not necessarily translate their political understandings of sexuality into their

²² "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984)," 4 March 1972.

²³ Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, 73.

bedrooms all of the time. Lesbians during the 1970s did not all embrace the elimination of unequal relations of power in intimate relationships or incorporate spirituality into their sex lives.²⁴ In fact, many lesbian feminists, who were purportedly having sex to raise their consciousness, were also actively seeking out a more traditional form of sexual satisfaction. Ruth, herself, was longing for sexual satisfaction, in the form of orgasms, for much of the 1970s. By the 1980s Ruth wrote that her interest in orgasms had waned, desiring a physical intimacy that did not necessarily include sex; however, she also was clearly concerned that her and Jean's relationship had been celibate for the six years leading up to their split.²⁵ There was a paradox for Ruth here, because she did find deep satisfaction in physical closeness but perhaps she also knew that their six years of celibacy reflected deeper problems in their relationship.

Even for the first few years of her relationship with Jean, Ruth's main frustration about her sex life was that she was not having enough sex, or orgasms for that matter. Sexuality, in a general sense and in their intimate relationship with each other, became a key site for the integration of, and turmoil with, their political beliefs in their private lives, but in comparison to other aspects of their feminism, lesbian sexuality was an area that caused great conflict between Jean and Ruth. In order to overcome their sexual

²⁴ This objection became more vocal by the late 1970s and early 1980s, with writers such as Pat Califia critiquing the assumptions that all lesbian sexual practices rejected power play. In the *Advocate* in December of 1979 Califia mocked the 'vanilla' parameters of lesbian-feminist sex, "I am obviously a sex pervert, and good, real true lesbians are not sex perverts. They are high priestesses of feminism, conjuring up the 'wimmin's' revolution. As I understand it, after the wimmin's revolution, sex will consist of wimmin holding hands, taking their shirts off and dancing in a circle. Then we will fall asleep at exactly the same moment. If we didn't all fall asleep, something else might happen – something male-identified, objectifying, pornographic, noisy, and undignified. Something like an orgasm." With frustrations about lesbian-feminist sexual ideology that were reminiscent of Nestle's description of the "respectability" of lesbian feminism, Califia critiqued the prescriptive nature and gendering of female sexuality in lesbian-feminism. See: Pat Califia, "A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality," in *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey Escoffier (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 2003), 530.

²⁵ "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984)," 27 Nov 1984 letter inside front cover.

incompatibilities, the Mountaingroves used the tools at their disposal, namely feminist theory and therapeutic practice, to improve their relationship.

Despite her rejection of the heterosexual model of sexual relationships, Ruth Mountaingrove still held onto many of the standard sexual expectations of the larger society; one that she was frustrated for not living up to was her inability to orgasm while having sex with Jean. She struggled with this, believing intellectually that one could have satisfying intimacy without orgasm but repeatedly getting down on herself for being concerned about this struggle. Living a life outside of patriarchal society and emancipated from the sexual standards and demands of men, she still struggled. Combining the intimacy and sexual satisfaction she desired was the largest problem for Ruth when she chose a homosexual identity. She did not find a long lasting sexual compatibility with Jean. Here was a hurdle to selecting one's sexual choice based on political ideals. Having a spiritual and emotional connection to Jean did not always translate into a satisfying sex life for the two women, perhaps because sexual desire and compatibility do not always operate on logic or shared values. There may be a distinct difference between being woman identified in your friendships and your emotional energies, and being woman focused in your sexual desires. To deal with this inconsistency, Ruth and Jean employed therapeutic language and practice.

The therapeutic model, so clearly integrated in the feminist movement, for example in the spiritual consciousness-raising in *WomanSpirit Magazine*, was foundational to the Mountaingroves' personal relationship and the transformations they believed their relationship could inspire. That transformation required expressing their personal needs and wants to each other, with an openness based on their relationship of

trust and caring. This belief in the power of therapeutic practice both helped and injured their relationship with each other over their ten years together.

Their questioning of the foundations of human sexuality and their sexual non-conformity, not just their lesbianism but their non-monogamy, had its foundation in the larger sexual revolution of the 1960s, which also employed psychological concepts to explore human sexuality. In the spring of 1972, Ruth was asking herself foundational questions about the nature of sexuality in general, stating that she was

Confused, bewildered, irritated, frustrated by what sexuality is, or rather by not knowing. It is eros and after I've said that what have I said? Sexuality is irrational, it moves in feeling not in the mind. Some times thinking can set it off. Sometimes it flows from the gut or from another's touch. Sometimes the touching must be censored – otherwise signals are given that are not valid. A teasing invitation which does not intend to follow through only leads to misunderstanding on the other person's part. But the irrationality, the madness, the unlogic of eros, makes structure impossible.²⁶

Ruth uses the term “eros” to describe an intimate connection beyond just sexual satisfaction, terminology drawn from larger scholarly discussions of sexuality that were occurring at the time. While Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung engaged with the idea of eros, the latter gendering it as a distinctively female principle, Ruth's conception of eros may have come from the work of philosopher Herbert Marcuse, a scholar whose work had a huge impact on the counterculture.²⁷ In his hugely popular 1955 work *Eros and Civilization*, which combined the influence of both Marx and Freud, Marcuse argued against the repression of so-called natural instincts. While Ruth struggled with the

²⁶ Ibid., 31 May 1972.

²⁷ C. G. Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine* (Routledge Ltd, 1982).

“unlogic of eros,” Marcuse argued that sexuality, “the most ‘disorderly’ of all instincts,” was the location where a non-repressive culture must be tested.²⁸

Additionally, Ruth tried to understand the roots of sexuality by combining the insights she had gained from the Women’s Movement and therapeutic language. “How can we know what our sexuality is when we have taken all our clues from men – when we have accepted what men have defined us as. A man sees us through the projection of his anima as madonna’s and whores – we know we are neither.”²⁹ Once again using Jungian psychological terms, such as anima, Ruth connected larger questions about the roots of sexual desire to her evolving understanding of the structural inequality between the sexes.

The Mountaingroves experimented with a variety of therapeutic techniques, many of which they came up with themselves and some they drew from feminist theory. In the summer of 1972 they attempted extreme directness, asking for what they wanted in all situations, for example explaining in detail their motivation for wanting to go outside or leave a room.³⁰ Over the years this technique of relating to each other was supported and expanded through their reading of feminist works, such as Adrienne Rich’s *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying*, which called for women to examine how and why they were driven to lie in their relationships.³¹ When dealing with conflict between them, the Mountaingroves would set aside time to “clear the spring,” when the two women would

²⁸ Herbert Marcuse, “The Transformation of Sexuality into Eros,” in *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey Escoffier (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 2003), 600.

²⁹ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984),” 31 May 1972.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 30 July 1972.

³¹ Adrienne Cécile Rich, *Women and Honor Some Notes on Lying* (New York: Motherroot, 1982).

be as honest as possible with each other.³² Trying to get to their root of their problems through honesty helped each woman better understand the other's feelings but also caused a lot of additional strife in the relationship. This seems especially true when they honestly discussed their sexual relationship. When "clearing the spring" in January 1973, for instance, Jean told Ruth that when Ruth moved her body when she was aroused it reminded Jean of a man's reaction and turned her off. In response, Ruth told Jean how it felt to be rejected when Ruth reached out to her in bed. Understanding that the way they were communicating may not have been solving their problems, Ruth wrote, "Jean said she realized that this was happening and from now on she would tell me her feelings but she wouldn't stop me from touching her. This might have her climbing walls but she'd see how it would go. Telling me her feelings may stop me as effectively but will [sic] see."³³

Thinking that the elimination of inequality combined with total honesty would improve their relationship, the Mountaingroves began daily sexual counseling sessions with each other in the spring of 1974. They each put a variety of subjects related to sex onto pieces of paper, and each day one would be chosen at random for discussion. Starting their day's discussing a wide variety of sexual topics, such as "what partners [in a sexual connotation] mean in a relationship," "sexual inadequacy," "how I feel when I don't reach orgasm," "how I feel about body smells," and "sexual fears," for example, illustrate how the Mountaingroves prioritized improving their sexual relationship.³⁴ It is clear that they wanted to find a way to sustained satisfaction with each other. Their

³² "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984)," 10 Jan 1973.

³³ *Ibid.*, 11 Jan 1973.

³⁴ "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1974-1980)," Mar – May 1974.

experience may also shed light on some of the difficulties of trying to create a whole new social system and what the limits may be in imagining another system of intimate relating, especially one that fuses politics and personal feeling.

Their model of total honesty and the goal of figuring out how to be sexually compatible put quite a lot of pressure on each of the Mountaingroves individually and on their relationship as a couple. Ruth speculated, “I wonder if Jean and I aren’t expecting too much out of ourselves – in the nature of the superhuman perhaps. Perhaps at the moment I am faint hearted.”³⁵ Reflecting on all the work they had already done in their relationship, only a bit over a year into it, she went on to question whether their problems persisted due to a continued inequity in power in their relationship. “We have been through soul searching, examination, analysis, role reversals, trying to explain each of ourselves to the other, trying to understand the feelings. Some of this work is revolving around control – I would call it bossing or a more common experience on leading. It’s the initiating of every project and the carrying out sometimes by agreement, sometimes not.”³⁶ Still searching for a solution to their personal problems through her feminist understanding of desirable power relations in relationships, Ruth continued to work on this relationship for almost ten more years.

Perhaps tired of more traditional therapeutic practices, the Mountaingroves also developed more creative practices, including “dancing out their feelings.” This practice appears to have consisted of each of the Mountaingroves creating their own dances that expressed their feelings through movement. This process seems to have been done both

³⁵ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984),” 30 July 1972.

³⁶ Ibid.

alone, to figure out one's own feelings, and with others, in order to express one's feelings to someone else. For instance, in order to compare their perspectives on raising sons, Ruth and Jean began "dancing the politics of raising a son."³⁷ Here they combined their political project with dance, an artistic and creative outlet they both enjoyed. This artistic outlet for frustration and conflict surprisingly hints at the parts of the Mountaingrove's relationship that were a source of joy and contentment to the both of them. Ruth's diary on the whole may not reflect the days, actions, relations, and thoughts she was satisfied or happy with while she lived in southern Oregon because her diary served as a place for Ruth to both vent her personal frustrations and work through problems in her feminist evolution. Sprinkled between long entries about the difficulties of their relationship, sexual and otherwise, are hints about what kept the Mountaingroves together for ten years, a bond that was grounded in an array of common interests and dreams. Perhaps dancing together was one of these bonds.

Taking joy in physical labor was something else that the Mountaingrove's shared together, enriching both their physical lives and their intimate relationship. The work they were doing to reshape their lives and their psyches was supplemented by their physical work together, figuring out new forms of cooperation in their physical work as well as their personal relationship. Cooperative labor became a point of pride for both of the Mountaingroves, with a prime example being their "two-woman saw," bought early on in their relationship. In an interview in the book *Lesbian Land*, Jean and Ruth were

³⁷ Ibid., 16 Jan 1973.

clearly very proud of having built up their land together, highlighting all of the structural and foundational improvements they had made at Rootworks.³⁸

Jean and Ruth also shared a gentle intimacy that can be seen in the quiet moments the two women spent together. After walking together through their sacred grove and up into the hills above it, Jean and Ruth

Walked back to the main road and down to the blue berry patch – found a rabbit warren among a grove of old apple and pear trees. Looked at where the men had dragged out dead trees from the hillside and how they had strewn slash – wood just the right size for burning so we plan to return with the truck and gather for fire wood. As we emerged from the woods it began to snow and we walked home in a snowstorm to our warm room.³⁹

Taking a stroll through the woods, the Mountaingroves clearly enjoyed exploring nature together, sharing a love of the small wonders and beauty of nature and a repulsion to the destruction of nature at the hands of men. Discussing the joys of Rootworks that they shared together, Ruth stated, “It is not all work at Rootworks. There are evenings for talk, discussion of feminist and spiritual concerns, times for music in the barn loft, sharing songs and more talk, time for laying back and enjoying, time for walking in the woods, sitting in the garden, finding all the spaces Jean has made beautiful with her flowers and her revealing of that particular space’s beauty.”⁴⁰

There is also a joy in revolutionary living, in having a compatriot in a groundbreaking struggle. The groundbreaking project of women’s liberation that brought them together was the glue that most likely kept them together for 10 years. As

³⁸ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 125–128.

³⁹ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984),” 3 Jan 1973.

⁴⁰ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 128.

revolutionaries fighting for a cause, although painful in particular ways, there was a commitment that overall must have been very satisfying for both Jean and Ruth.

Neither Jean nor Ruth moved to southern Oregon alone. The Mountaingroves were each mothers before they came to lesbian feminism. Jean, who arrived first in southern Oregon, brought her two kids, Pann and Tane, ages 11 and 14, along with her. Ruth brought two of her four children, her daughter Heather, age 8, and her son Jeff, while another of her sons, David, came out to Mountain Grove later (figure 17). Settling into their new home together, in the winter of 1971, Jean, Ruth, Heather, Jeff, David, Tane, and Pan crammed themselves into an A-frame house at Mountain Grove.⁴¹



Figure 17. Ruth Mountaingrove with her daughter Heather Ikeler

⁴¹ Mountaingrove, "Time Line."

Discussions of 1970s feminisms have often characterized the position of the women's movement vis-à-vis motherhood as one of apathy or downright rejection; however, this generalization, perhaps constructed to paint feminists in a poor light, does not truthfully represent feminist discourse or general concerns. Historian Lauri Umansky, in her history of discourse surrounding motherhood in 1960s and 1970s feminisms, argued that motherhood was actually a central topic of investigation in the women's movement, with feminists concentrating, "on the topic from every possible angle."⁴² Far from universally rejecting motherhood, women involved in the second wave of feminism were interested in reforming the relationship between mothers and children as well as between mothers and fathers. While early radical feminists rejected obligatory motherhood, it was during the development of cultural feminism that motherhood was employed as a universal experience that feminists could draw on in their attempts to unify all women. Interest in motherhood in cultural feminist ideology eventually shifted toward a more symbolic mother, whether the earth as a mother or historical matriarchs. This meant that women within the movement had to balance their ideological understanding, and veneration, of motherhood and their everyday experiences as mothers, in some cases, and their position as daughters as well.

While Jean and Ruth restructured their lives to mirror their lesbian-feminist politics, their children's lives also became embroiled in their political project, sometimes deliberately and sometimes not. While the Mountaingroves were interested in changing their relationships with their children, these relationships were certainly not the central focus of their project of self-transformation. To begin with, Ruth had sometimes

⁴² Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived*, 3.

ambivalent and often conflicted feelings towards motherhood. She embraced aspects of motherhood metaphorically, particularly in relation to her spirituality. She also valued the reproductive capacity of her own body, being particularly saddened that her ability to reproduce life ended when she started menopause, dealing with “sadness and resignation” during the “death of reproduction.”⁴³

This veneration of motherhood in theory competed with her personal need for liberation from the demands that motherhood made on her time and energy in practice. Describing her need for time to work on herself, Ruth complained of never being left alone:

Then my son David drained me, demanding unconsciously, that I tell him who he is. We take a walk. I try to keep him off head trips. I tell him to spend the days in the woods. He goes on and on. I tell him my energy is limited. He persists. I have to fight for any bits of inwardness and not just David. Jean and Heather and the community, but myself. I too am culturally oriented to give, give, give, and even when I have nothing to give.⁴⁴

Here Ruth sees her children’s need for attention as a drain but she also sees her own instinct to give them her energy as misguided. Her feminist project, then, required her to move her focus away from the demands of her children, no matter the cost to them, because the cost to herself was too high.

Ruth and Jean’s relationships to their daughters were different in some ways from their relationships to their sons. Jean was close to her daughter, Pann, even though they did not always live together either. (Even now Jean happily lives next door to her daughter, and her daughter’s family, in Wolf Creek, Oregon.) Ruth’s photography collection contains hundreds of photos of her daughter, Heather, capturing the girl’s

⁴³ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984),” 29 March 1972.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 4 March 1972.

evolution from preteen to high school graduate. In dozens of letters, Heather wrote to her mother of the trials and tribulations of growing up, asking her mother for input, and money, for whatever scheme she was up to while at a counterculture boarding school. This was not, however, a typical mother and daughter relationship. Just ten years old when she came to southern Oregon, Heather Ikeler had more freedom than most girls her age. While Ruth obviously loved and cared for Heather deeply, she intended to raise an independent woman, one who would embody the feminist ethic the Mountaingroves were so invested in developing. Reflecting on Heather's walk home alone in the middle of the night, when the temperature hovered below freezing, Ruth beamed about her daughter's independence. "She had walked in the dark, no moon but some light from the snow, the half mile home to the A-frame in 30 degree temperatures. I was amazed. She is certainly a hardy child. She'll be a strong woman Jean says."⁴⁵

The relationships the Mountaingroves had with their sons, while rarely presenting as overtly hostile, can be best described as distant. Some separatist lands did not allow boys to live on the land, no matter their age, while others had looser restrictions, with an understanding that women should not be penalized just because they are raising sons. Because the Mountaingroves never lived in a cooperative separatist land, their sons seem to have been allowed in their home; however, none of their sons ever lived at Rootworks. Whether or not their cool relationships with their sons were directly related to the Mountaingroves' separatist ideology or just simply reflect the tensions that can exist between a variety of parents and children, one cannot say, but the reality remains that Ruth's diary documents years between visits with her sons, with long periods during

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4 Jan 1973.

which she did not even know where they were, and few, if any, photographs of her sons were included in the collection of photographs Ruth archived.

Jean and Ruth's liberation meant that their children would also be engaged in their own transformations. In the winter of 1973 Jean and Ruth attempted to implement a program of children's liberation, where the children would learn to care for their own needs. This had the added, or perhaps primary, benefit that it would also liberate Jean and Ruth from the drudgery of housework and care of the children as well. Ruth wrote, "The new year is beginning with a retreat. Retreat from Tane and Heather, retreat from making a fire to warm the A-frame, retreat from washing dishes and making meals – a quiet time that Jean and I will share together in Judy and Frank's room until they come back from San Francisco – an evaluation time both of ourselves and the children."⁴⁶

Withdrawing from the children during their days, but still sleeping in the A-frame house they shared with them in the evenings, the Mountaingroves were met with resistance to the project from the two children who still lived with them, Tane, Jean's son, and Heather, Ruth's daughter.

Escalating conflict with Jean's son Tane seems to have been a motivating factor for the retreat. The Mountaingroves separatism was never absolute, as they both had sons whom they loved and wanted to have relationships with, but their feminist politics did influence the way they raised their sons and how they viewed their sons actions in the world. Living with a teenage boy, while working through the impacts of the patriarchy, was exhausting to Ruth. After two days away from Tane, Ruth wrote, "We would like our children liberated and sharing with us mutually – they would rather have both their

⁴⁶ Ibid., 3 Jan 1973.

liberation and our being oppressed by them. And being free of 2/3 of male chauvinism has been a great relief – its like the trampled weed that doesn't know how far its down till it begins to rise again.”⁴⁷

There was a tension between what Jean and Ruth wanted from each other, be it simple attention or support, and the demands they each juggled with their children. Heather, writing to her mother in the 1980s, when the Mountaingroves were breaking up, told Ruth that she believed that Ruth had chosen Jean over her own children. While Heather had longed for attention from her mother when she was a child, when in her 20s Heather felt that the time for a certain kind of closeness between them had passed, worrying that when Jean was gone Ruth would make demands on Heather’s time. She wrote to Ruth,

I am your friend but because of the way our lives have gone I’m not able to give you very much. I'm too far away both in distance and in time... as far as the relationship between you and me. I feel a great deal of love for you. I also feel that some precedents were set when we were living at Mountain Grove. You chose to do your thing, which did not include me, and I, out of necessity, accepted it. I still feel that what you did was very irresponsible and selfish. I still basically dislike Jean because of the amount of pressure she put on you to make the decision you did and with little tact she let me know how very little I was wanted in her life. I don't think that my feelings about this will ever change. These things are what they are and no amount of maturity or understanding on my part will ever change their complexion. You chose to form a relationship of mutual interest and caring between us and thats fine but remember its caring about each other, not caring for and I cannot care for your emotional needs. You have to learn how to do that, and learn how to take responsibility for yourself now that Jean’s gone.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid., 4 Jan 1973.

⁴⁸ Letter from Heather to Ruth, 8 Oct 1984, Box 3, Folder 19, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene.

It was true that both Jean and Ruth both spoke of being “tired” of the other’s children, wanting the focus of their partner on them, not their partner’s children. In the spring of 1974, when Heather was twelve, Ruth wrote, “Jean told me she was O.D.d on Heather so we have not seen much of her ... Heather’s place where she will stay during these two weeks is still unclear. I was considering alternatives – she could buy a tent – she asked to borrow Jean’s but was not enthusiastically accepted.”⁴⁹ Ruth and Jean’s priorities clearly had an impact on the relationships these women had with their children and on the children’s lives.

This is not to say that Ruth Mountaingrove’s relationship with her children was always rosy before she adopted feminism. A major part of the feminist project Ruth was engaged in was dealing with trauma from her own childhood and dealing with the trauma she had inflicted on her children before becoming a feminist. Ruth had come from a family with a history of violence. Both of her parents had been abused by their parents and that abuse was repeated on Ruth, with her father beating her with a belt until “the neighbors intervened when I tried to get away from him by trying to jump out the bathroom window.”⁵⁰ Later trapped in a marriage she was unhappy in, and pregnant with an unwanted child, wanting a girl after birthing two boys, Ruth physically abused at least one of her children, David, early on in his life. Comparing his position as an unwanted child and Jean’s position as a child of parents who wanted a boy, Ruth recalled the abuse she had inflicted on him as a child: “I remember my chasing him through the yard ... with a hammer in my hand when he was four or five. I frequently slapped him about the

⁴⁹ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1974-1980),” April 1974.

⁵⁰ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984),” 27 Nov 1984, letter in front cover.

head and called him stupid. David was not strong like Jean is, both had a rigidity about them that came with rejection ... A child who is rejected from birth needs acceptance into the world and what I could not do for David I perhaps can do for Jean.”⁵¹ Writing to a friend about the missteps in her life, Ruth admitted that her “mothering of him came too late in his life.”⁵² In early 1979, at the age of 25, David Ikeler committed suicide in the woods at Mountain Grove, after a long struggle with mental illness.

When it came to living out the principles of their feminism, it was the Mountaingroves’ separatist feminism that defined the boundaries of their community. This separatism was by no means concrete or impenetrable, but instead defined a loose parameter that helped them to focus their energies on women. Both Jean and Ruth interacted with men on a fairly regular basis, whether it was with their sons or men in town, but their emotional energy was not freely given. When first settling in southern Oregon, the Mountaingroves were not yet separatists. At Mountain Grove, the women decided that they would no longer give their energy to men, stating that they would give, “Normal politeness but no going out of the way to sooth or otherwise provide emotional matrix for men.”⁵³ In addition, they no longer wanted to engage with women’s individual problems with men, tired of long discussions with women about their marriage problems for instance. This emotional rejection of men, and their subsequent withdrawal from the community as a whole because of this perspective, did not sit well with the men and with some of the women in the community at Mountain Grove. It was made clear to

⁵¹ Ibid., 30 Oct 1984.

⁵² Ibid., 27 Nov 1984, letter in front cover.

⁵³ Ibid., 9 July 1973.

them that Mountain Grove was no longer the right place for them, with David Young, the leader of the community, stating truthfully that their intentions no longer meshed with the intentions of the community as a whole.⁵⁴

Despite their separatism, it was a gay man, Carl Wittman, who gave the Mountaingroves a place to live after moving out of Mountain Grove and connected them to other lesbians in southern Oregon (figure 18).⁵⁵ Their separatism allowed for a limited relationship with men at this point but their relationship with Carl certainly muddied the tight connection they saw between the truth of feminist theory and lived experience. This challenged the Mountaingroves because of an inability to rectify the differences they saw in their relationship with Carl and their understandings of systematic inequality between men and women. Carl and his boyfriend Allen were fixtures in the lives of Ruth, Jean, and their children, even after the Mountaingroves moved off of Carl's land. Carl not only gave them a place to live but also introduced them to lesbians in the area and cared for their children at times, lending emotional and material support to several of their sons over the years.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 12 Oct 1972.



Figure 18. Carl Wittman at home at Golden

The relationship the Mountaingroves enjoyed with Carl put their commitment to dogmatically living out their politics to the test, because Carl himself had a radical vision for social transformation that included the liberation of women and wholeheartedly embracing the necessity of a women's liberation movement. While writing about gay liberation in 1970, Carl tied women's liberation, specifically, to a more expansive fight for equality: "It's been a male-dominated society for too long... so gay women are going to see things differently from gay men; they are going to feel put down as women, too. Their liberation is tied up with both gay liberation and women's liberation." He went on about women in the women's liberation movement writing, "They are assuming their equality and dignity and in doing so are challenging the same things we are: the roles, the exploitation of minorities by capitalism, the arrogant smugness of straight white male

middle-class Amerika. They are our sisters in struggle.”⁵⁶ Carl’s radical politics and homosexuality thus clearly endeared him to the Mountaingroves; however, it did not eliminate their apprehension at dealing with a man.

Part of the apprehension on Ruth’s part was a lingering jealousy she experienced when Jean got excited to see him. The other part of it was her inability to position his actions, by all accounts kind and generous, within her political understanding of men in relation to women. In July of 1972, when the Mountaingroves were still living at Mountain Grove, Ruth wrote,

Carl treats women as persons not as sexual objects. This turns them on but bewilders the heterosexual woman at the same time ... All the things socialization has told them will get them a man will not get Carl – he continues to be comfortable in a comradely, friendly, affectionate warm way. It gives me pause – this focus of Jean’s, this looking forward to Carl’s coming, this little girl, child-like response from Jean. So I ask myself am I jealous and if I am, why? Carl is not another woman, nor is he a heterosexual male. What ever it is – it leaves me feeling hurt – it diminishes me – this feeling, this reaction I have – so that I cannot enjoy Carl as a person. But yesterday I had an insight, which is still largely in my head at the moment so how much I can implement it I don’t know. I’ve told Carl I want to talk to him about jealousy because I feel he is detached enough to examine it with me. The insight is that rather than being upset with the way Jean is relating to Carl, that I let Jean do her own thing and that I enjoy Carl for himself in my own way; enjoy him as the warm intelligent person he is.⁵⁷

Acknowledging that Carl was a kind and intelligent human being, taking ownership of the problem being on her end, and even considering asking for his counsel in resolving what she saw as a problem in herself, Ruth still had reservations about investing her energy in him, solely on the basis of his maleness.

⁵⁶ Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, 332.

⁵⁷ “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984),” 2 July 1972.

But there is one other thing that is bothering me and that is that again we are investing some of our energy in men – this time homosexual men – rather than women – perhaps in some ways it is a tiny step forward but men homosexual or not still have the power whether they want it or not. Fag men have had a hard time keeping gay women working with them because of the power factor. It's I'll [sic] make the decisions and you make the coffee dear all over again and while I do not see much of this in Carl or Ted or Dick its still here, perhaps not as unconscious as in the heterosexual male.⁵⁸

Here Ruth's theoretical understanding of men's social location overrode her personal experience with the men in her life. Her separatist ideology kept her at arms length from men who were her allies. Open and honest about their politics, when discussing Ruth's jealousy, Carl asked Ruth about her separatism.

Carl asked me if I am more woman-identified than Jean. I thought about that and said I did – my politics are to help, give comfort, love women not men – I do not give my energy to men. The colonizers do not need it. I know they have their problems and I wish they'd get on with their own liberation and leave me to mine. I can't do it for them and they don't understand what I'm talking about because they never been colonized even as children. They have never been female. They have no idea what it is to be a woman.

The rigidity that Ruth was coming to in her political belief is illustrated in her relationship to Carl. He was undoubtedly a person of importance in their lives, caring for Jean and Ruth as friends, as well as caring for their children. But the boundary between the personal and the political in the case of men did not allow for a full trust in his character or his intentions.

Carl was especially important in the lives of Ruth's son, David, and Jean's son, Tane. Jean admired and was thankful for the role he had played in her son's life, giving credit to Carl for curing Tane's severe dyslexia through teaching Tane to folk dance,

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Carl's passion while living in southern Oregon.⁵⁹ Carl and Allen were also a source of stability for Ruth's son David during the course of his struggle with schizophrenia. When Carl and Allen took David in in the fall of 1977, agreeing to give him a place to live, Ruth was clearly thankful for their kindness toward her son, stating, "I'm not sure they can handle it but I know one other thing – I can't. I believe I could physically but I can't emotionally. So all I can be is grateful."⁶⁰ Once David became too violent for Carl and Allen, and the two men asked him to leave, however, Ruth reverted to her understanding of the hierarchy of patriarchy to criticize the men's decision, claiming that, in the end, they could ask him to leave because they owned the land and thus were free to "give and take away."⁶¹ Because Jean's and Ruth's perspectives on the world were so politicized, all of their own actions as well as those they had relationships with were also invested with political significance. While Ruth could choose not to take in her son because of the trauma it would cause her psyche, Carl and Allen's decision that they could no longer deal with David was grounded in their position of male privilege. The line between the personal and the political then moved, depending on one's social location.

There is a contradiction in any utopian project between how you envision yourself and the way you are, in how you envision your ideology working and the way it works on

⁵⁹ Jean Mountaingrove, interview with the author, 7 May 2011, Wolf Creek, Oregon.

⁶⁰ "Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1974-1980)," 30 Sep 1977.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5 Feb 1978.

the ground. The Mountaingroves attempted to shake off the patriarchy, to create a whole life around a new identity, and friction emerged when there was a difference between what they attempted to do and how it played out (figure 19). In the fall of 1984, the Mountaingroves each moved into separate spaces at Rootworks and began the long process of sorting through all of their belongings, a “very tiring business.”⁶² The separation came after Jean had found a new love interest. Ruth wrote in her diary, “Here I am at 61 almost 62 doing psychic work again. I thought Jean and I were going to stroll into the sunset together growing old together.”⁶³ This came as a hard blow to Ruth, someone who had suffered from fear of abandonment for much of her life. Acting out her rage by smashing windows in their barn and intentionally crashing her car into their truck, Ruth could not depend on the insights she had gained about dealing with jealousy and resentment from the women’s movement and its texts. Instead, she declared, “My child is kicking and screaming with an anger and despair that has taken hold of my adult, and resulted in physical damage not to myself or others but to property, mainly mine.”⁶⁴ Here Ruth puts the blame on her inner child, as her adult self would not act in ways that were incompatible with her feminist politics. Ruth was ashamed of her actions. She had done so much work to overcome feelings that were rooted in patriarchal influences and yet, at this late point in her life, her anguish won out. After Jean and Ruth attempted to live as friends and land partners for the better part of a year, Ruth ended up moving off the land they had shared.

⁶² “Ruth Mountaingrove Diary (1971-1974, 1984),” 4 Sep 1984, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Box 9, Special Collections University of Oregon Knight Library.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 27 Nov 1984, letter in front of diary.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*



Figure 19. Jean and Ruth

In their time together, the Mountaingroves had the audacity and daring to attempt to build the lives they wanted. Those lives could be viewed idyllically from the outside or realistically from the inside. In their personal relationship, Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove attempted to reimagine the connection between intimacy, sexuality, and partnership. They also used their relationship as a testing ground for putting feminist theory into practice. Believing in the revolutionary possibilities of relationships, the Mountaingroves explored what it meant to be wholeheartedly committed to another person and to a political ideology at the same time. This project transformed the way they understood themselves and each other, and it transformed their understandings of their roles as mothers and the lives of their children. It impacted the way they saw other people's actions, with their political agenda influencing how each saw the positions and actions of those in their lives. Their expanded definition of what it meant to be a lesbian was more difficult to put into practice when trying to raise sons or coming into contact

with men who did not seem outwardly oppressive; it was in these personal relationships that the contradictions of the politics of identity became a particular problem. Overall, in both the good and the bad, attempting to inject a radical political ideology into every aspect of their lives made the political truly personal and the personal truly political for Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In the Summer 1977 issue of *WomanSpirit Magazine* Jean Mountaingrove discussed her hopes for the future while reflecting on the impact of the women's movement on her individual transformation and on her continued contributions to the world:

I am grateful that, because of the Women's Movement, my life-time will include knowledge of myself through these experiences of power—essential ingredients for my completion as a person, and for my continuing usefulness in creating a better culture. I age with full acceptance of its changes, since I expect to become a complete and fulfilled person: a new kind of old woman in the company of other old women who are also fulfilled. It is a rich and pleasurable prospect.¹

At the core of Jean's vision of the future was her continued engagement with other women who had been on similar journeys; journeys that centered on improving the self yet had the underlying intention of bettering the lives of all women. In addition to helping form a community of women dedicated to creating a new and prosperous women's culture, the wholesale adoption of a feminist worldview influenced both the Mountaingrove's relationship to culture, to individual transformation, and to their relationships to each other and their families. Feminism transformed the Mountaingrove's whole lives.

Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove's influence on their community's ideology and cultural discourse was profound. The process of making their publications, *WomanSpirit Magazine* and *The Blatant Image*, and the impact of the finished products brought women

¹ Mountaingrove, "My Struggle With Power," 29.

to their community, whether physically to Oregon or virtually through sustained correspondence or readership. It also brought those women in the southern Oregon lesbian community into close contact on an emotional and intellectual level (figure 20). Grounding their spiritual and artistic projects in the model of consciousness-raising, they showed how feminism could be incorporated into all aspects of one's life.



Figure 20. OWL Farm council meeting,
by Ruth Mountaingrove, 1977

WomanSpirit Magazine evolved out of Jean Mountaingrove's desire to infuse her spiritual beliefs with feminist ideology, and vice versa. The outcomes from this endeavor are varied, with the magazine providing a unifying project for many women and yet establishing boundaries around how and who could be included. For Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove the magazine provided a small amount of financial security, allowing them the luxury of living in relative isolation while doing work directly related to their personal transformations. For women in the southern Oregon community, including the Mountaingroves, spirituality, and the production of the magazine itself, was a unifying

foundation for their utopian project. Drawing on a multitude of spiritual and cultural traditions, as well as creating some entirely new ones, the magazine was a space for women all over the country to come together to explore the intersections of spirituality and feminism. Spirituality connected feminists closely to the earth, which they gendered and sexed female. Their relationship to the earth operated on several levels, with the earth serving both as their mother and lover. Here was the source of their power and history, as they perceived the female essence to be rooted in its reproductive capacity, whether literally or figuratively. This connection to the earth in turn rooted their feminist identities to the earth, making their rural lives and homesteads central to their feminist development. Nevertheless, because their project was rooted in the politics of identity, centering the category of women as a universal classification, they were rooted in a biologically defined female identity more than in sexual orientation. With embodiment central to their spirituality, their ideology overall centered on women's body parts, with anatomy as the chief marker of identity. In addition, they established norms that they believed represented the experiences of all women in the southern Oregon community, which was predominately white. The cooptation of various traditions of people of color and the exoticization of Native and African women, for example, may have actually served to keep the community from attaining what it truly desired, racial and ethnic variety.

The Blatant Image, and the Ovular photography camps put on at Rootworks, evolved out of Ruth Mountaingrove's desire for a feminist photography community that extended outside of her physical isolation in southern Oregon. Feminist photography was important on a deeply personal level to Ruth Mountaingrove, and she wanted to create a

publication that could serve as a space to discuss the need for feminist photography and what exactly that entailed, as well as creating a magazine that would publish work like she was doing in southern Oregon. Through Ruth and her photography we can see the feminist project of self-transformation and recovery in action. Attempting to counter the negative images of women that so dominated depictions in the larger society, Ruth took pictures of herself and other women in the act of self-actualization. Whether in pictures depicting intimacy between women or the power of women's labor, Ruth highlighted women's bodies as a site of transformation. Still, in her private reflections we can see some of the nagging limitations to these transformations. Eliminating negative self-image and doubt was clearly easier said than done, as Ruth continued to work on her own self-confidence and self-image throughout her time in southern Oregon.

Photography was a fruitful feminist artistic project for many women in the community and beyond, as it simultaneously served as both a creative outlet and a political statement. Attempting to reform the ways women were presented in photography in the larger society, feminist photographers chose photographic subject matter that challenged dominant assumptions about what kinds of women should be photographed. Feminist photography once again put women's bodies front and center, in an effort to expand the array of women's lives and bodies, which were shown in the world. In the process they actually illustrated the complications inherent in their own idea of a universal sisterhood.

The Mountaingrove's personal transformations and the openness with which they presented their radical identities were certainly important to the success of their publications. From the outside, the world Jean and Ruth had created at Rootworks must

have seemed so idyllic, and in many ways it was. They fled lives they did not want, reinventing their relationships and their community from a new feminist model. This vision of how life could be must have been a comfort for readers of their magazines. Like so many other women's cultural projects that began in the 1970s and 1980s, such as women's music festivals, the dream of Rootworks served as a comfort to women who, for whatever reason, could not themselves live on women's land. Even for those lesbians who did not want to live in isolation from men, the Mountaingrove's lesbian feminism offered a glimpse of a world in which women lived openly with other women, a radical idea in the 1970s, when gay people were subject to a variety of extreme, overt, and legal forms of homophobia.² Yet, here was this community, in rural southern Oregon, with members who had the gall to live openly as lesbians, and with the even greater gall to document their existence publically.

The Mountaingrove's history is about more than their public impact, however; it is about the lives they created for themselves in southern Oregon, lives that took the insights of the women's movement profoundly to heart. Unhappy with the trajectories of their own lives, each of the Mountaingroves made radical changes in order to find happiness and fulfillment. Identifying the root of much of their unhappiness in the larger system of patriarchy, which exploited and oppressed all women, the Mountaingroves found healing and recovery from this trauma in their separatist existence. This separatism was never absolute isolation but was a position that required their energy and their work to be dedicated to women and women's culture. The greatest resistance to

² While the state of Oregon criminal code that banned sodomy and other forms of nontraditional sex was revised in 1971, essentially legalizing homosexual sex, an anti-discrimination law in state employee hiring, for instance, was not enacted in the state of Oregon until 1988. A statewide ban on discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity was passed in 2007. For more on the history of Oregon LGBT rights law see the Gay & Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest <http://www.glapn.org>

male supremacy, they believed, was to build an alternative world where women could first figure out how they had been oppressed and then imagine and implement a new way.

Their search for contentment was not a search for financial stability or the creature comforts that so dominated the consumer age; instead they focused on improving their lives through working to improve the lives of other women. This process included a reevaluation of all of their preconceived notions about themselves and where their desires and dreams came from. It meant that their relationship to each other and their relationships with those around them were also up for examination.

Even after they separated and moved apart, Jean Mountaingrove and Ruth Mountaingrove each continued to dedicate themselves to their own personal transformations, trying to figure out, for instance, what their intimate relationship had meant in the larger scheme of things and why it had ended. Several years after their intimate relationship had run its course, Ruth wrote to Jean, asking her, among other things, how she had changed since they had been apart. Ruth was still trying to sort out what it all meant and why she still felt resentment toward Jean. She wondered whether Jean was grieving about their breakup, as presumably Ruth was herself doing. Jean responded:

Grieving our break-up? No – I felt a deep sense of relief and release, along with the exhaustion. Now I am feeling some nostalgia for the good things and the good times. I was desperately unhappy for such a long time before I could make the decision – I did my grieving then, perhaps. How have I changed? I asked Madrone [their mutual friend]. She said I was lighthearted and mellow. I think I am also more open in confiding my fears and unhappiness. I still give unwanted advice but less often. Regarding justification for your anger: I was sometimes curt, sarcastic, impatient, critical, superior, and demanding – plenty of reasons for you to resent me.³

³ Letter from Jean to Ruth, 15 Dec 1988, Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Box 5, Folder 4, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene.

Relaying both her personal shortcomings and her long period of unhappiness with Ruth, Jean continued the legacy of radical honesty they had practiced together for so many years. Jean was unafraid to tell Ruth the truth, with the understanding that Ruth would do the same and that while it might have hurt, honesty was still the best policy.

With this idea of honesty in mind, Jean and Ruth worked to make personal experience a fundamental basis on which to form larger understandings about the position of women in the world. If women's experiences were not reflected in culture or theory then the culture and theory needed to be revised. As Jean wrote in the final issue of *WomanSpirit Magazine*, those who had read *WomanSpirit* knew that their personal experiences were "now not theory but facts." Understanding the limits of their project but expressing her hope for its continued importance, she continued, "And we succeeded. Not for everyone, of course, but for many... [*WomanSpirit Magazine*] will be there for women to draw ideas and strength from long into the future."⁴ To Jean, this permanent record of what they had accomplished had not outlasted its usefulness, but instead could continue to inspire other women to raise their consciousness.

Legacy

I first saw the photographs of Ruth Mountaingrove in the fall of 2010, in the online digital collection of the University of Oregon. Feeling that I had "found" something of significance, I showed them to every lesbian friend who was willing to click through the images. Without fail, everyone I showed them to was mesmerized.

⁴ Jean Mountaingrove, "Farewell from WomanSpirit," *WomanSpirit Magazine*, Summer 1984, 64.

Most of my friends already knew that this community existed, but it was somehow different to see actual images of these women. This was visual documentation of a lesbian community that existed long before we created our own. These images, suffice it to say, touched me deeply in a way I cannot easily describe. Why then, when I do not subscribe to much of their political ideology and when I do not desire to live in that kind of community, do I feel such a connection to what these women built?

Part of the answer to this question brings me back to the work of Ann Cvetkovich. Cvetkovich uses the concept of an “archive of feelings” to describe “cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception.” Cvetkovich is engaging most directly with discourse around trauma. “Trauma,” according to Cvetkovich, “serves as a point of entry into a vast archive of feelings, the many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more that are part of the vibrancy of queer cultures.”⁵ Here is a contemporary take on the need for healing space. Much like Jean Mountaingrove’s vision of separatism as a place to heal from the traumas of living in patriarchy, but not reliant of the boundary-making that was so central to identity politics embedded in the project of separatism, Cvetkovich imagines lesbian cultural texts as not only important for the makers but also important as archives that can then be accessed by others.

Many of Ruth Mountaingrove’s photographs don’t directly address trauma but instead document an idealized lesbian existence, reflecting not the whole reality of women’s lands, but many of the positive aspects of life in a rural lesbian community and

⁵ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 7.

the feelings associated with the revolutionary project they were undertaking. There were feelings associated with the taking of each of these images, feelings that are then potentially accessible when viewed. Through these images we see a community built on cooperation and physical labor and freely expressed lesbian intimacy and sexuality. While many of the women who contributed to *WomanSpirit Magazine* were comforted and fortified by reclaiming a distant past in which women were not subject to sexist exploitation and oppression, so too does the imagery and the discourse of the southern Oregon community itself provide an important vision of the past for those in the current era. They open up new possibilities for the future, possibilities of queer resistance, of lesbian radicalism still to come. The culture developed in southern Oregon hints at the endless possibilities of and in queer culture. It is familiar and distant at the same time. The community of women in southern Oregon is related to my own history and to the history of my chosen community. Thus, the affective response I originally had to Ruth's work has fueled this thesis.

One example of the contemporary creative use of the legacy of the southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community is the work of Tammy Rae Carland, who was also inspired by the work of Ann Cvetkovich. Carland is a photographer based in Oakland California, who has documented a variety of "women only" spaces, including the Michigan Woman's Festival and southern Oregon lands such as Rootworks and Womanshare. In this collection, called "Outpost," Carland uses photography, an artistic medium so near and dear to Ruth Mountaingrove, to connect with a generation of lesbians before her. In "Covered Wagon" Carland photographed the outhouse at Rootworks, a unique outdoor toilet with room for two simultaneous occupants, in a

photographic style that was, “loosely based in the traditions of landscape photography.”⁶ While feminist photographers like Ruth Mountaingrove largely experimented with portraiture, reimagining the form from a feminist viewpoint, Carland has extended this feminist project of reimagining onto photographs of landscapes. “Covered Wagon” is a photographic landscape of a woman-made environment, a different kind of naturalness than one would traditionally associate with landscape photographs. The natural environment provides the background but the outhouse at the center, although not currently occupied by women, is all about the women who previously inhabited the space. While the concept of visibility, so central to the work in magazines such as *The Blatant Image*, was about presenting the current realities of women, Carland’s work seems to be about remembering, and dreaming of, a queer past of queer space. In the words of Cvetkovich, projects such as this “suggest how a radical archival practice might sustain a queer future by reminding us of our queer past.”⁷

Here the work of the Mountaingroves, their personal lives at Rootworks, and the expansive intellectual and spiritual work they produced are not forgotten; instead these two parts of their lives come together in the work of a contemporary lesbian artist and her imaginings of what the future might hold for lesbians’ spaces. Carland states, “Part of the lure for me is an unashamed romanticism, a love affair with the utopic ideals of a chosen community and an intimate survival-based relationship with the earth.”⁸ At an

⁶ “Tammy Rae Carland: ‘Outpost (Work in Progress)’,” California College of the Arts, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://cca.edu/calendar/468>.

⁷ Ann Cvetkovich, “The Queer Art of the Counterarchive,” in *Cruising the Archive*, ed. Mia Locks and David Frantz (Los Angeles: ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, 2011), 35.

⁸ Ibid.

exhibit of Carland's work at the Queer Cultural Center in San Francisco her photographs of separatist spaces were hung on the walls, while a case in the gallery held Carland's personal archive of lesbian-feminist publications; among them was *WomanSpirit Magazine*.⁹ In 1991 Carland had come across the book *Lesbian Land*, which documents Rootworks, among other lesbian lands, in a thrift store in North Carolina, before she had any idea that the southern Oregon community existed.¹⁰ Flipping through the pages was an experience she described as akin to coming across buried treasure. The idea that there was such a variety of communities of women living in rural isolation in the 1970s was almost unbelievable to her. It gave her a sense that people had treaded this path before and that there was a lost possibility for continuity between lesbian generations. Coming across *Lesbian Land*, and the history it represents, opened up a world of possibilities in her work, but also it moved her emotionally.

This may not be exactly the kind of remembering, or engagement with, their legacy that women in the community envisioned, as Carland's photographs, whether intentionally or not, acknowledge an uncomfortable truth about the emptiness of many of these lands today. However, it is also a way of paying homage and acknowledging the work of these women without exactly duplicating their culture. I would argue that this kind of engagement with their legacy is more in keeping with their original feminist project, one that incorporated political ideals and personal experience into an ever evolving discourse about how to make women's lives better and freer. A true

⁹ "Tammy Rae Carland," Queer Cultural Center, accessed 12 March 2014, <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/QIY/Carland.html>.

¹⁰ Tammy Rae Carland in conversation, Womyn and Grrls, Riot!: an Intergenerational Discussion on Radical Lesbian Feminist Communities, 7 May 2013, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon. Video accessible at <http://youtu.be/QmAjPtDARZU>.

appreciation of the legacy of the Mountaingroves and the women of the southern Oregon lesbian-feminist community is not necessarily to move onto women's land and duplicate the work they have already done, but instead perhaps to respect and acknowledge what they did and then move forward. If we return to Jean's metaphor of separatism as a hospital, the solution for queer women today must be more open, as we now know that healing requires addressing a variety of interconnected ailments. The archive created by the Mountaingroves is one important material among many that might be necessary for that healing. The publications the Mountaingroves created then served not just to help the women of that period but to preserve an archive of queer possibilities for continuing the feminist project, for reimagining queer spaces, and for dealing with the variety of traumas that come along with the huge variety of inequalities that still exist in the world.

Through the Mountaingroves story, we see the interconnectedness of 1970s social movements, the contradictions inherent in movements based on identity, and the lasting changes that occurred when relationships and culture were reimagined and recreated in a variety of new models. We can also better understand the intimate relationship between feminist theory and realities on the ground, how this theory fit, and didn't fit, into the personal lives of women. In the end this seems to have been one of the biggest lessons Ruth herself learned over the years:

Has all this raised my consciousness? If you mean that I have come to see that nothing is simple, that women are complex creatures, that ideals get shredded by realities, my answer is, Yes. And owning land and businesses, and all those attendant problems have made me understand that what looked like a black and white answer has a lot of greys! For example, my ideal of a woman's community where we could all work together on various projects has real women in it who don't always want to act out my dream. So the idealist in me had to adjust to what is. ... I must also admit that sisterhood, that euphoric flower, is far more complex than we thought 10 years ago when we were all oppressed, all equally colonized. We had yet to become aware of how unconsciously we hurt each other

by stereotyping, scapegoating and privilege. And I'm sure there are more hurts we have not yet voiced or heard because we haven't yet discovered all the ways we hurt.¹¹

Here, Ruth acknowledges that there were many things they did and could not anticipate when they committed themselves to feminism, first and the foremost the ways in which women's lives do not always match up to others' expectations or ideals. Idealism was an important motivating factor for the success of their magazines but it was worn down by the realities and compromises that come with working with others. Thus, the feminist project is one that is ongoing, one that Ruth and Jean did not have all the answers to but to which they gave their all.

So much work went into building and sustaining the community in southern Oregon. It is only natural that the women who invested their whole lives in this endeavor would like to see it live on. Residents still work at drawing new women, young women, to southern Oregon lesbian lands. Yet many of the foundations on which their project was erected do not support contemporary feminisms as much as they once did. Their vision of a utopia populated by women and grounded in the politics of identity experienced obstacles when up against the sheer variety of concerns and experiences that make up women's lives. The boundaries they made around how a woman was defined and what her priorities should be – which solidified their community in many ways – are a barrier to the adoption of their project in the contemporary era. Nonetheless, the larger projects of the community, such as the spiritual and artistic cultures featured in this thesis, succeeded in a variety of ways that should be remembered. These women went outside of the gendered roles they were raised to inhabit and found that they could

¹¹ Mountaingrove, "The Sybil Inside Us," 52–53.

acquire new skills and reorder the division of labor with the support of their community. Linking their political perspective to a variety of cultural projects was a fruitful undertaking that stimulated creativity alongside activism, merging the two. The most fitting legacy for this community is not the continuation of their generational project specifically but the creation of a new feminist project inspired and grounded in the distinctive feminist project that occurred in southern Oregon.

These women show us that queer radicalism is not exclusively urban or male; it can occur in a variety of spaces, it can be integrated into all that we do, and it is only limited by our imaginations. Their process was, and is, about reimagining and rebuilding our realities to fit our political understandings of what is right and wrong, taking theory and melding it into contemporary lives with the understanding that the process will be messy and disjointed but eventually worthwhile. They ground us in our history, with a variety of cultural aspects that should be remembered and kept, and a variety of missteps that should be learned from and then cast aside. The proverbial baby should not be thrown out with the bathwater. Instead, we can learn from the personal and public work these women did and then use what we have learned in our own feminist projects in the future.

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