

“THE TIMES OF WIMMIN”: QUEER FUTURITY IN *WOMANSPiRiT*  
MAGAZINE, 1974-1984

by

SOPHIA DEFRANCE

A THESIS

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Approved: Steven Beda, Ph.D.  
Primary Thesis Advisor

The southern Oregon women’s community began during the 1970s and developed into a loose network of intentional lesbian collectives concentrated in the rural southwest part of the state. As internal divisions fractured the feminist movement, some lesbians found themselves dissatisfied with living in the patriarchal, heteronormative cities, desiring spaces made by and for lesbians. Lesbian feminists and other women formed collectives on rural land in order to get closer to nature and create a new women’s culture. This culture was made and spread through numerous publications, like *WomanSpirit* magazine, which ran from 1974 to 1984 and both fostered and documented the burgeoning lesbian feminist spiritual culture of the time. *WomanSpirit* was futurity bound—from beginning to end, its contributors imagined what it might be like to create a better future for themselves and their sisters out of the constrictive, patriarchal present. This thesis uses queer futurity, coined by José Esteban Muñoz in 2009, to analyze *WomanSpirit* and its visions of the future, ranging from sincere beliefs in utopian idealism to anxiety and the fear of an imminent nuclear crisis.

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Archives at the University of Oregon, in the Knight Library, especially Linda Long, who discovered this rich lesbian history hidden away and organized the materials for research use. The archives got me started on this journey and it was enriching to hold and read through the primary documents of the SO CLAP! (Southern Oregon Country Lesbian Archival Project) collection. It was like no other research experience I have ever had.

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## INTRODUCTION

### LESBIAN LAND AND LESBIAN FEMINISM

The 1960s and 1970s were periods of immense social and political change in the United States. Many second wave feminist activists sought to develop feminist theory while organizing political action and unifying feminists through a sense of shared oppression and the goal of women's liberation. Gay liberation activists achieved significant political and social gains following the Stonewall riots of 1969, though homophobic backlash was also prominent, with people like Anita Bryant campaigning against gay rights in order to Save Our Children. Internal divisions were prevalent within both movements. While some branches of feminism were radical and inclusive, some of the leaders within women's liberation were mainly focused on the experiences of middle- and upper-class housewives and failed to grasp the unique issues faced by women of color, poor women, and queer women. Similarly, though the origins of the gay liberation movement were deeply radical, and gender non-conforming people and people of color were crucial in fighting for the progression of gay rights, gay activism became more conservative over time, representing only certain "acceptable" images of queerness.<sup>1</sup> During the 1970s, some lesbian feminists became entirely dissatisfied in participating in mainstream political and social channels, and found themselves lacking both space and political prioritization within the movements for women's and gay liberation.

Around this time, hundreds of thousands of people migrated from cities to the countryside as a part of the back-to-the-land movement, many aiming to escape materialism and get closer to nature. Rural collectives formed during this time had a variety of interests and

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the evolution of gay liberation, see Ashley, Colin P. "Gay Liberation: How a Once Radical Movement Got Married and Settled Down." *New Labor Forum*, 2015, Vol. 24(3) 28-32, pp. 28-31.

identities—some were based on religion, others on politics, and others still on the counterculture. Some of the most distinct rural communities forming during the 1970s were on women’s land, also known as lesbian land. If they had the means to do so, many of the most radical lesbian feminists moved to the country during this time to get involved in the women’s land movement. The residents of women’s lands, or lesbian lands, had immense impacts in the development of lesbian feminist culture and thought, as press networks and the women’s grapevine reached far beyond the countryside. Not every woman who lived on or visited lesbian land was a lesbian, but lesbians kept the community alive.

The first lesbian feminist periodical entirely focused on feminism and spirituality was *WomanSpirit*, founded by Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove in 1974 in Wolf Creek, Oregon. The magazine was published quarterly for ten years, on the seasonal solstices and equinoxes. Different works of art, research, and creativity were pasted together, intentionally laid out by an open collective which always included the Mountaingroves. Each of the forty issues is printed in black and white, and each is almost spilling over with material from all different kinds of women, both chronicling and furthering this lesbian feminist cultural awakening. Though residents of lesbian lands were frequent contributors, participating in the magazine by sending mail to Wolf Creek was much more accessible than visiting or moving to Wolf Creek for many people. While I focus more on how women of color engaged with the magazine, there were often submissions about aging, disability, class, and more, and there is much more research to be done on how all kinds of people made and make queer history. La Verne Gagehabib, a former resident of Oregon lesbian land, noted how women of color are often omitted or ignored in dominant histories, even by other women.<sup>2</sup> Some of the work on lesbian lands follows this pattern because

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<sup>2</sup> Gagehabib, La Verne. *Circles of Power: Shifting Dynamics in a Lesbian-Centered Community*. New Victoria Publishers, 2000.



of the focus on lesbian lands and the leading figures within the movement, who are mostly white. While there were certainly women of color who lived on lesbian lands, Gagehabib and her co-author, Barbara Summerhawk, were only able to find seven to interview for their book, *Circles of Power: Shifting Dynamics in a Lesbian-Centered Community*. Researching *WomanSpirit* in my work has enabled me to include the perspectives of some of the women of color who were active in the development of lesbian feminism.

Lesbian identity has not remained the same between then and now—it is a social category and identity shaped by political and historical contexts and has changed over time. Some feminists believed in an essential experience of gender closely tied to the body and genitalia, and this extends to some lesbian feminists as well. Many of the contributors to *WomanSpirit* cared deeply about menstruation, childbirth, and believed in certain “female” skills like nurturing, caring, healing, and so on. These beliefs, along with the numerous alternative spellings of “woman” (womyn, wommon, wimmin, wombyn, etc.) align troublingly with the rhetoric of transgender exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs, today. The most well-known transphobic feminist is currently author J.K. Rowling, and TERFs are partially responsible for the drastic and deeply concerning increase in anti-LGBTQ legislation introduced in the United States in recent years, which tends to target transgender youth in particular.<sup>3</sup>

When I began this research, I wanted to look at how lesbian land communities may have expressed transphobia in their goal to acquire women-only spaces, but it seems like most participants in *WomanSpirit* simply were not thinking about transgender people. Gagehabib and Summerhawk wrote that women in the southern Oregon women’s community held diverse views

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<sup>3</sup> American Civil Liberties Union. “Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures.” Updated on May 2, 2023. <https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights>

on both bisexual and transgender people. One interviewee, Billie, said that she thought a transgender woman would be welcome at Womanshare, another Oregon lesbian land, though she “would want her to be honest about who and what she is.” Another person, Bethroot Gwynn, who is still active in the Oregon women’s land community, was not open to including transgender women when she was interviewed for *Circles of Power* over twenty years ago. In 1999, she said “I don’t relate to ‘queer’ theory or the ‘queer’ movement.”<sup>4</sup> In this community, there was and is a wide range of ideas on every issue. Lesbian feminists, land lesbians, and their views can be just as complex, complicated, and contradictory as all other people, and cannot be described as a monolith. I firmly believe in the humanity of transgender people, and I denounce any branch of so-called feminism which refuses their participation. The essentialist beliefs of many *WomanSpirit* contributors may have been due to a latent transphobia, an older view of gender given the historical context, or a bit of both. These beliefs are still worthy of research and analysis even if they are sometimes flawed, nonsensical, or confusing, and if they conflict with more current understandings of gender.

There is a significant amount of research focusing on Oregon lesbian lands and communities across the country. As Keridwen Luis notes, women’s lands are simultaneously simple and complex. Working with women’s lands in Massachusetts, Tennessee, New Mexico, and Ohio, she researched as a participant-observer the construction of lesbian identity in the United States, along with the influences of race and class, the matters of hygiene and aging, and, crucially, the feminization of the landscape and the scapegoating of transgender women’s bodies.<sup>5</sup> Catriona Sandilands focuses specifically on lesbian separatist communities in southern

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<sup>4</sup> Gagehabib, Summerhawk, “Circles of Power,” p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Luis, Keridwen. *Herlands: Exploring the Women’s Land Movement in the United States*. University of Minnesota Press, p. 3

Oregon, applying queer ecology to landdykes' experiences of nature and the ways they have produced intricate forms of lesbian eco-political resistance.<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Marie Almquist, influenced by Sandiland's work, further explored lesbian ecological practice and the potential for lesbian land futurity.<sup>7</sup> Heather Jo Burmeister, in her thesis about lesbian lands in southern Oregon, focuses on the collectivism, art, and re-constructions of the self and the community which influenced local lesbian land life as well as the broader LGBTQ+ culture.<sup>8</sup>

Sarah Thornton examines the "amazonal fantasy" in her thesis "'Go West, Young Dykes!' Feminist Fantasy and the Lesbian Back-to-the-Land Movement, 1969-1980," in which she explains how lesbian feminists often pictured a return home to the past and projected their fantasies onto their communities on women's land. They often imagined themselves as "protagonists in the fight to reinstitute matriarchal order in the world" who would channel the collective power and strength of women who had been restricted by patriarchal oppression. Many of them wanted to return to the matrilineal societies that they believed existed before the dawn of the Roman Empire. Through fantasy, lesbian feminists reclaimed power over their identities and claimed space in the political movements of the time.<sup>9</sup> I expand upon Thornton's work by examining how lesbians in *WomanSpirit* utilized queer feminist fantasy and temporality to express their images of the future.

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<sup>6</sup> Sandilands, Catriona. "Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature: Toward a Queer Ecology." *Organization and Environment*, Vol. 15 No. 2, June 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Almquist, Jennifer Marie. "Incredible Lives. An Ethnography of Southern Oregon Womyn's Lands." Oregon State University Thesis, April 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Burmeister, Heather Jo. "Rural Revolution: Documenting the Lesbian Land Communities of Southern Oregon." Dissertations and Theses, Portland State University, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Thornton, Sarah. "'Go West, Young Dykes!' Feminist Fantasy and the Lesbian Back-to-the-Land Movement, 1969-1980, p. 50.

## QUEER FUTURITY AND QUEER TIME

Queer theory has always been linked to temporality, but the field's intentional and widespread adoption of time as a critical framework took place just before José Esteban Muñoz published *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Queer time is an important theoretical concept in Muñoz's work. In the 2007 special edition of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, "Queer Temporalities," José Esteban Muñoz finishes the issue and his article by concluding that "Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being both in the world and in time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough."<sup>10</sup> Thinking about queer time involves imagining queerness as another way of being created through "temporal and historical difference," whether operating from the past, present, or future.<sup>11</sup> Queer time and space develop in opposition to "the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction." Queerness is not only related to sexual identity, but is also attached to "strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices." While not all queer people live in radically distinct manners compared to heterosexual people, a queer way of living often involves "subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being."<sup>12</sup>

The potential of queerness to "open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space" is part of what makes queer identity so captivating as a form of self-identification and description over the last few decades.<sup>13</sup> For example, transgender adults going through a medical transition may feel that they experience a kind of second puberty, or they may

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<sup>10</sup> Muñoz, Esteban José in "On Time," by Monaghan, Whitney. *GLQ* 25:1, Duke University Press, 2019, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> Freeman, Elizabeth in "On Time," by Monaghan, Whitney. *GLQ* 25:1, Duke University Press, 2019, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place*. New York University Press, 2005, pp. 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.

have to wait seemingly endless periods of time for the healthcare and treatments they need. Some may also feel a sense of lost time, in the absence of a childhood which aligns with their freest and most authentic self. Queer people, therefore, often have different perspectives and experiences of past, present, and future compared to cisgender heterosexuals who follow the normative timeline of “child, teenager, job, marriage, house, children” more closely.<sup>14</sup> In the context of this thesis, many of the contributors to *WomanSpirit* magazine were older lesbian mothers who divorced their husbands in their forties, fifties, and sixties, including Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove. Much of the lesbian feminist writing on temporality during the 1970s and 1980s echoes some ideas that would be developing about queer time later on.

Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*, explains how queerness is an ideality that can be used to imagine a future, to dream of other ways of being in the world, and to propel oneself onward through the present. This book responded to the academic climate at the time which was dominated by the repudiation of political idealism and utopianism, with critiques of “naiveté, impracticality, or lack of rigor.”<sup>15</sup> It also responded to the queer political agenda at the time, which was bogged down in the here and now—now, the there and then, the present which is now in the past. The primary focuses of mainstream gay and lesbian politics, including same-sex marriage and the right of queer people to serve in the military, were trapped in the normative present. While individual queer people should have equal civil and social rights, a queer politics stuck in the “stultifying, deadening, capitalist present” cannot liberate the future and be

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<sup>14</sup> Thorn, Abigail, PhilosophyTube. “Queer,” YouTube Video, 36:39, Oct 28 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Hi6j2UXEZM>

<sup>15</sup> Muñoz, Esteban José. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th Anniversary Edition. NYU Press, April 2019, p. 45.

channeled towards the imagination and creation of a universal better world.<sup>16</sup> For Muñoz, queerness is about futurity and hope, and is always on the horizon.

Muñoz uses hope as a critical methodology and a backward glance that enacts a future vision. Futurity is something that is not quite here, and queerness is performative as it is a being and “doing for and toward the future.” Lesbian lands are a perfect phenomenon to research through the lens of queer futurity, though they flourished long before Muñoz published the first edition of *Cruising Utopia* in 2009. Lesbians are rarely mentioned in his book. The land lesbians of Oregon were explicitly and actually attempting to create utopias, and they often imagined and wrote of a matriarchal, lesbian future—the Times of Wimmin. Though queer futurity is a very effective framework to analyze and understand lesbian lands, I have not seen it utilized in this way. Like Muñoz, I cruised the *WomanSpirit* archive and gathered just a handful of examples of lesbian feminist futurity—there is much more research to be done.

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<sup>16</sup> Pakis, Elisavet. “Locating hope and futurity in the anticipatory illumination of queer performance.” *Borderlands*, Volume 10 No. 2, 2011, p. 1.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT

In the early 1970s, feminism was not taken very seriously by many mainstream publications and government officials, as some, like U.S. Senator Jennings Randolph, described women's liberation as "a small band of braless bubbleheads" who were not a "valid voice" for women in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Increasing numbers of women, however, were beginning to make their own choices rather than aligning with the expectations placed upon them by patriarchy. Birth and marriage rates went down during this time, sharply declining for upper class white women in particular. And, for the first time, most American women were working outside of the home, not just poor or racialized women who had always been working. Some employers even preferred to hire women—for part-time jobs paying low wages. Increases in women's employment also meant the rise of unequal pay.<sup>18</sup>

During this time, lesbians were caught between the women's movement and the fight for gay rights—and found themselves lacking both physical and social space and adequate prioritization. Second-wave feminist activism, the era of feminism which began in the 1960s, often manifested in the development of women's spaces, but many spaces take shape around privilege and exclusion. While women of color, working-class women, and queer women were highly involved in the feminist activism of the time, racism, classism, and homophobia were significant problems in the movement.<sup>19</sup> Still, proponents of women's liberation were achieving

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<sup>17</sup> United Press International. "Senator Says Marchers 'Braless Bubbleheads.'" *Desert Sun*, Volume 44, No. 20, Aug 27, 1970. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=DS19700827.2.19&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN----->

<sup>18</sup> Jionde, Elexus. Intelextual Media. "How Did Life Radically Change for Americans in the 1970s?" Youtube Video, 36:08, May 10, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vZTINXn6cw&list=PLO6\\_8hHRB--sHI67uorgsGq\\_P-CMWsBY7&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vZTINXn6cw&list=PLO6_8hHRB--sHI67uorgsGq_P-CMWsBY7&index=3)

<sup>19</sup> Enke, Anne. "Smuggling Sex Through the Gates: Race, Sexuality, and the Politics of Space in Second Wave Feminism." *American Quarterly*, Vol. 55 No. 4, p. 638.

important victories. Feminist organizers successfully lobbied for the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, which was signed into law in 1974. Before this, women faced numerous obstacles when trying to acquire bank accounts, credit cards, and mortgages. Banks were allowed to refuse a single woman a credit card, and married women were required to get their husband to cosign to get one.<sup>20</sup>

By the end of the 1970s, the Equal Rights Amendment, which had first been proposed in 1923 and would protect gender equality under the U.S. Constitution, had been stuck in legislative gridlock for years. Though Congress had approved the ERA between 1971 and 1972, supporters of the STOP ERA movement, led by Phyllis Schlafly, were able to carry out an effective campaign against its ratification. After founding STOP ERA in October 1972 and appointing herself as national chairman, Schlafly argued that traditional gender roles ensured women's rights and freedoms and so-called "liberation" would take away the various "rights" certain women enjoyed—exemption from the draft, legal protection against violent men, the provision of a home and financial support from a husband, and so on.<sup>21</sup> And even after Congress extended the deadline to 1982, it was unlikely that the 38 states required for ratification would do so in time. The chances of ERA proponents to achieve their goals became even slimmer after the election of President Ronald Reagan. Though the ERA has been reintroduced numerous times since 1982, ratification has never been successful.<sup>22</sup>

The National Organization for Women, or NOW, was the largest feminist organization of the 1960s. Some anti-feminist women and activists portrayed feminists as militant lesbians who

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<sup>20</sup> Jionde, "How Did Life Radically Change for Americans in the 1970s?"

<sup>21</sup> Miller, Eric C. "Phyllis Schlafly's 'Positive' Freedom: Liberty, Liberation, and the Equal Rights Amendment. *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 2, SUMMER 2015, pp. 287-288.

<sup>22</sup> Jionde, Elexus. Intelextual Media. "What was the 1980s Like for Women?" Youtube Video, 1:37:21, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJW\\_NR8\\_2WQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJW_NR8_2WQ)



hated men. Betty Freidan, co-founder of NOW, and some other feminist leaders sought to distance themselves from that perception and alienated lesbians and queer women in the process.<sup>23</sup> In 1969, Friedan spoke against the “lavender menace” which ostensibly had the potential to threaten the credibility of the women’s movement. Though Freidan later rescinded her homophobic statements and beliefs, lesbians claimed the label of “lavender menace” with pride and insisted upon lesbianism as a political, cultural, and sexual form of resistance to patriarchy.<sup>24</sup> Lesbian artist Ivy Bottini designed NOW’s logo in 1969 and NOW was also co-founded by Pauli Murray, who was queer and gender non-conforming. While lesbians and queer people had made immense contributions to the feminist movement, they often found themselves ostracized and used as scapegoats within mainstream feminism.<sup>25</sup>

## **GAY LIBERATION**

The American emphasis on conformity and extremely narrow ideas of who constituted true citizens made assimilation and respectability politics key strategies of survival for marginalized people during the middle of the twentieth century. Fighting for inclusion in the realms of government, private enterprise, and “respectable” social life was therefore very important for some marginalized folks, and arguably still is. The fight for gay liberation mirrored the movement for Black Power during the 1970s, with groups like the Gay Liberation Front encouraging gays to be out and proud. As more people came out over the course of the decade, more queer spaces and services for queer people were created, including bars, restaurants, law firms, travel agencies, and churches. By the end of 1973, the American Psychiatric Association

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<sup>23</sup> Korengold, Maeve. “The Complexity of Lesbian Identity Following Second-Wave Feminism.” *Reclamation Magazine*, Mar 19, 2022, <https://reclamationmagazine.com/2022/03/19/the-complexity-of-lesbian-identity-following-second-wave-feminism/>

<sup>24</sup>“Radicalesbians.” *NYPL*, Manuscripts and Archives Division, Diana Davies Papers.

<sup>25</sup> Korengold, “Complexity of Lesbian Identity.”

removed homosexuality from their list of mental disorders.<sup>26</sup> In early 1975, Otis Francis Tabler became the first openly gay person to receive a security clearance from the U.S. Department of Defense. Over two decades earlier, President Eisenhower had issued Executive Order #10450 and banned queer people from employment in the government due to the risk they posed to national security.<sup>27</sup><sup>28</sup> Though Tabler received clearance in the mid-1970s, the widespread discrimination of queer people in the federal government due to security concerns was not formally outlawed until President Bill Clinton issued Executive Order #12968 about two decades later.<sup>29</sup>

Around the same time, the U.S. Civil Service commission lifted the ban on gay people being employed by the federal government. These gains of civil rights for queer people were met with homophobic backlash by politicians like California State Senator John Briggs, who introduced legislation in 1978 which would require the firing of queer teachers, and supporters of gay rights in general, in public schools. Many queer activists successfully organized to defeat the bill, including Harvey Milk, who became the first openly gay man to win an election for public office in the United States in 1977. He served as San Francisco city supervisor for just under eleven months before his assassination by former city supervisor Dan White, who also killed Mayor George Moscone. Moscone had approved a bill sponsored by Milk which banned

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<sup>26</sup> Jionde, “How Did Life Radically Change For Americans in the 1970s?”

<sup>27</sup> Themetropoleblog. “Fighting For Clearance: SoCal, The Military Industrial Complex, And Gay Liberation...” The Metropole, Jun 1, 2018, <https://themetropole.blog/2018/06/27/fighting-for-clearance-socal-the-military-industrial-complex-and-gay-liberation-or-your-weekly-reminder-to-enter-the-grad-student-blog-contest/>

<sup>28</sup> The use of euphemisms to avoid direct references to homosexuality was very common during the Lavender Scare, a moral panic about queerness in the U.S. federal government which was connected to and mirrored the anti-communist Red Scare of the 1950s. U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy often insisted upon the association of queer people and communists, and the generic term “security risk” was applied to both groups by U.S. officials. Johnson, David K. *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*. University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 5-8.

<sup>29</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Executive Order #12968.” The White House, Aug 4 1995, <https://sgp.fas.org/clinton/eo12968.html>

discrimination based on sexual orientation in public accommodations, housing, and employment. Milk is still viewed as an icon and martyr in San Francisco and the queer community.<sup>30</sup>

The Stonewall riots of 1969 were a major achievement of gay liberation. While police raids of queer bars were commonplace during this time, the patrons of the Stonewall Inn in New York City refused to passively endure police abuse and humiliation on the evening of June 27. Some of the most important figures in these riots and gay liberation in general were transgender people of color, including Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. Johnson and Rivera are also notable for the founding of Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) in the year following Stonewall.<sup>31</sup>

Just as lesbians and women of color found themselves alienated and underrepresented within mainstream feminism, queer people of color and transgender people were often excluded from prioritization in gay liberation as well. One should note how Milk, Tabler, and other queer people who were able to work in politics and other important positions of power were often also white men. While lesbians and queer women insisted upon a gendered understanding of sexuality within gay liberation, differences and disagreements between queer men and women hindered the efficacy of mixed-gender activism. Furthermore, the resurgence of the women's movement during the previous decade led to a noticeable shift of women's energies from gay liberation to feminist activism. Lesbians were fighting for recognition for their identities and issues unique to them within the feminist movement and gay liberation simultaneously.<sup>32</sup> As political lesbianism developed further, some lesbians came to view their identities as the truest form of feminism and

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<sup>30</sup> Jionde, "How Did Life Radically Change For Americans in the 1970s?"

<sup>31</sup> Jenkins, Andrea. "Power to the People: The Stonewall Revolution." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, Michigan State University Press, Vol. 6 No. 2, Summer 2019, pp. 63-68, [https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/26/article/733297/summary?casa\\_token=Ca5DFyj4n6AAAAAA:mn\\_3XfTgPXEbRyVcP\\_OJEwGv62o\\_160b7co8NkPrGuH7ehjihC9KgDXYwaKZFrASiJNDVEb7Iqw](https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/26/article/733297/summary?casa_token=Ca5DFyj4n6AAAAAA:mn_3XfTgPXEbRyVcP_OJEwGv62o_160b7co8NkPrGuH7ehjihC9KgDXYwaKZFrASiJNDVEb7Iqw)

<sup>32</sup>Rupp, Leila J., Taylor, Verta, and Roth, Benita. "Women in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Movement." *The Oxford Handbook of U.S. Women's Social Movement Activism*, May 10 2017, pp. 7-10.

began to imagine leaving the patriarchal and heterosexist communities they found themselves in to create something new.

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Both mainstream and radical environmentalism developed out of twentieth-century conservation efforts, which aimed to moderate the impacts of industrial society on natural resources. The oldest conservation organization in the United States, the Sierra Club, was also very influential in the development of conservation and environmentalism.<sup>33</sup> As 1969 commenced with a major oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara and concluded with the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act, the new executive director of the Sierra Club was wondering whether the organization needed to reconsider their priorities. Emerging concerns included overpopulation and pollution, which indicated a shift from traditional conservation into environmentalism. While these movements were similar, environmentalists tended to be more concerned with nature that was visible and closer to cities and suburbs along with the pollution of living spaces. Traditional conservationists, on the other hand, typically emphasized faraway parks and forests along with natural resource extraction.<sup>34</sup>

Environmentalism can also be understood through its relation to other activism of the time. For most of the 1960s, the connection between social justice and environmentalism was not fully realized, as the focus on social justice within the student movement left little room for environmental concerns. Ecological activism suggested that restrictions on human action were necessary, and that individual freedom could lead to social and environmental harm. This contradicted the tendency of generally optimistic New Left activists, many of whom believed in

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<sup>33</sup> Woodhouse, Keith Makoto. *The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism*. Columbia University Press, 2018, pp. 11-12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

the possibility of achieving social justice and a better world by taking power from the establishment and handing it to the general public, which kept ecological concerns from being a priority. Towards the end of the decade, however, a growing minority in the movement began to realize how fundamental environmentalism was for understanding and criticizing the problems with American society. The student movement evolved greatly during the 1960s. Some students shifted from relatively moderate criticisms of liberalism to a more anarchist ethos, valuing broad participation, direct action, individual choice, and decentralized power. This growing radicalism effectively created the space for environmentalism in the political priorities of leftist activists, as some began to see society as a product of nature, which could potentially provide the solutions to numerous social issues.<sup>35</sup>

The development of the environmental movement can be broadly explained by the activist culture of the 1960s, increased scientific knowledge of environmental problems, more media coverage focused on ecological crises, a rise in outdoor recreation, the post-World War II economic boost leading to increased interest in the quality of life, and the evolution of conservation groups into environmental organizations. Increased support for environmentalism entering the 1970s is evident in the national celebration of Earth Day 1970 along with the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Council on Environmental Quality.<sup>36</sup>

## **LESBIAN SPACES, LESBIAN LAND**

Meanwhile, lesbian feminism continued to develop as a means to affirm lesbian identity and acquire lesbian spaces. Lesbian feminist organizer Candace Margulies, founder of the Coffee

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<sup>35</sup> Woodhouse, Keith M. "The Politics of Ecology: Environmentalism and Liberalism in the 1960s." *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, Michigan State University Press, pp. 53-62.

<sup>36</sup> Dunlap, Riley E. and Mertig, Angela G. "The Evolution of the U.S. Environmental Movement from 1970 to 1990: An Overview." *Departments of Sociology and Rural Sociology*, Washington State University, pp. 2-3.

House Collective in Minneapolis, recounted her goals for creating the collective as a lesbian space, explaining “I wanted lesbians to have a nice place to go. I wanted lesbians to have a place that offered them a sense of legitimacy, and the kind of thing that heterosexual people have and enjoy: a place to go and dance and listen to music. And it was a much more consciously political place than the bars... and no men! That was very exciting for women!”<sup>37</sup>

The Southern Oregon Women’s Community is “a loosely formed network of intentional, rural lesbian land collectives and individual women living in the small towns or nearby countryside who consider themselves part of the network.”<sup>38</sup> The definition of who is included in the community varies among its members, but it can generally be understood as the women who are currently or were previously living on women’s land between Eugene and California in Southern Oregon.<sup>39</sup> Women’s land is not necessarily or exclusively lesbian, but lesbians power the community and keep it alive.<sup>40</sup> The creation of intentional communities on lesbian land reflected the desire within the broader lesbian movement of the time to acquire women-only and lesbian-only spaces. In many ways, Oregon’s lesbian land culture was a result of the fracturing and narrowing of mainstream feminism.

In the early 1970s, women flocked to communities in southern Oregon, along with other areas of the country, powered by an idealist lesbian separatism and women’s cultural utopianism. They thought that they could construct an “alternative, exclusively women’s culture that was egalitarian, peaceful, and loving” following the collapse of American society, which they saw as imminent.<sup>41</sup> During this time, “male America’s” wars and hierarchies reached their most

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<sup>37</sup> Enke, Anne. “Smuggling Sex Through the Gates: Race, Sexuality, and the Politics of Space in Second Wave Feminism.” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 55 No. 4, p. 64.

<sup>38</sup> Gagehabib, La Verne and Summerhawk, Barbara. *Circles of Power: Shifting Dynamics in a Lesbian-Centered Community*, New Victoria Publishers, 2000, p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 33.

intolerable heights, and women saw immense potential in women's space and land. Aggie, a woman who was interviewed by LaVerne Gagehabib and Barbara Summerhawk for their 1992 book *Circles of Power*, explained that "it is really, really important, emotionally and psychologically, for lesbians to be able to go somewhere and take their shirt off if they want, talk about lesbian issues, kiss their lover on the front porch of their cabin and so on... I see it as a great service to the greater women's community."<sup>42</sup>

Though a large concentration of communal activity developed in Oregon in particular, this was mirrored throughout the country as a broader trend of going back-to-the-land. The United States has communal history dating back to the nineteenth century, with roots in agrarianism and notions like the pastoral ideal. During the 1960s, as a part of the drastic social and cultural shifts occurring throughout the country, there was a shift in the number of people who were born into urban life and made the choice to pursue a simpler existence away from the city.<sup>43</sup> This number increased noticeably as the hope and idealism of the 1960s faded and aging radicals, hippies, and countercultural folks turned towards intentional communities, which are also commonly known as communes. The communities formed during this period typically embraced environmentalism and denounced the values associated with the city, including materialism, pollution, and violence. It is estimated that at the movement's peak at the end of the 1970s, over one million people had gone back to the land in order to create or join homesteads and intentional communities.<sup>44</sup>

The earlier groups formed as a part of the back-to-the-land movement shared some aspects with the lesbian intentional communities that would soon be forming, such as the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>43</sup>Jacob, Jeffery. *New Pioneers: The Back-To-The-Land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable Future*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, pp. 5-6.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

aspiration to develop a closer relationship with nature. The land lesbians of southern Oregon were just a small portion of those people who sought a simpler life, and their communities were some of the most distinct. The countercultural aspect of the lands is aptly described by Holly Drew, who moved to Wolf Creek when she was twenty-four years old in July of 1978. She was “part of a thriving counterculture... we were refugees from a culture unable to contain diversity. We took power in our own hands, we lived by rules often at odds with mainstream law. We were righteous and proud, angry and rebellious.” She aimed to escape the “materialistic, heterosexual, goal driven world” of her upbringing.<sup>45</sup>

The original founders of women’s land in southern Oregon shared a vision of lesbian community. They chose Oregon because of the affordable land, though there were also good deals in Maine, Ohio, and some other states. Oregon posed some unique challenges to country lesbians. While parts of the state have a lovely, mild climate at certain times of the year, there are several microclimates across the land, ranging from wide sagebrush and flat desert in the east to the cool and rainy Portland area. Many women chose to acquire and live on land in the southwest interior of the state, which is marked by long and dry summer seasons that demand a good water system. During the founding and early development of women’s lands, they built and lived in cabins that lacked running water and effective insulation, connected by muddy, badly constructed roads and paths. In the following years, women upgraded their houses, irrigation systems, and power systems, many working with an ecologically conscious approach and aiming to leave minimal impact and embrace the natural cycles of the land.

The winters introduced the most difficult element of living in southern Oregon for many women—the rain, and the necessity of getting firewood, repairing buildings, or completing other

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<sup>45</sup> Drew, Holly. SO-CLAP! Collection, Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) Coll. 266, Box 18, Folder 15.



tasks during a storm. When Aggie was living at Womanshare, a women’s land founded in Grants Pass in 1974, she recalled “it was foggy for a whole month. Every day I walked up (to the main house) in the fog. It drove me crazy.”<sup>46</sup>

Two of the most important intentional communities of the early formation period of women’s land in Oregon include Golden Farm and Cabbage Lane, which were within walking distance of each other near Wolf Creek. Golden was originally a mixed-gender commune owned by two gay men and evolved into women’s land in the early 1980s. Golden no longer functions, but Cabbage Lane has been renamed Cabbage Canyon and has two new caretakers, Debbi and Jessi, as of September 2021.<sup>47</sup> Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove founded and began publishing *WomanSpirit* magazine there in 1974. Cabbage Lane formed when the Golden community decided to split the acres by gender—sixty-one for the women and twenty for the men. At one point, a woman from Portland received a settlement from her divorce and shared it with her friends. One of them lived at Cabbage Lane. The money was used for the down payment, and women’s land became reality in Southern Oregon.<sup>48</sup>

During the early formation of women’s lands, the dominant feeling was that womanhood was universally and essentially good, which was supposed to have been enough. However, lesbians and women in this movement were just as impacted by internal divisions and discrimination as feminist and queer activists of the time. Gagehabib, a former resident of Golden who is also Black and Indigenous, recalled how disagreements on lesbian land arose between long and short-term residents, middle and working-class women, “meat-eaters and vegetarians, separatists and non-separatist, disabled and able-bodied, [and] mothers and non-

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<sup>46</sup> Gage Habib and Summerhawk, *Circles of Power*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>47</sup> Cabbage Lane Land Trust, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100082685700690>

<sup>48</sup> Gage Habib and Summerhawk, pp. 41-42.

mothers.” Furthermore, as people who had been marginalized, disrespected, and oppressed by patriarchy and heteronormativity, and lesbians had a lot of anger to work through. More women in the Southern Oregon Women’s Community would seriously tackle their anger management issues by the mid-1980s, which often involved processing drug and alcohol use problems as well. Discourses across differences also became more commonplace as the community continued to develop.<sup>49</sup>

## **RUTH AND JEAN MOUNTAINGROVE**

Jean Mountaingrove was the mother of two teenagers when she realized she was a lesbian in 1970, at age forty-five, when she met her future partner, Ruth, in Pennsylvania. Ruth and Jean soon moved across the country to southern Oregon, where many people were experimenting with communal living in the rural areas of the state. The Mountaingroves lived in multiple communities during the early 1970s, including Mountain Grove, Golden, and Cabbage Lane—where they founded *WomanSpirit* magazine. *WomanSpirit* both fostered and documented the emerging lesbian feminist spiritual culture as it developed from 1974 to 1984. From its first issue, many of its contributors focused on the future, which would come about through the creation of women’s culture and the reconnection of women with their essential power and matriarchal “herstories.”

In 1965, Ruth Mountaingrove divorced her husband of almost twenty years and involved herself in the feminist movement. She was in Philadelphia during the late 1960s, joining the local NOW chapter in 1966 and working full-time in Philadelphia's women’s liberation movement from 1968 to 1971.<sup>50</sup> As a lifelong artist, Ruth was already an avid photographer by the time she

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, pp. 43-44.

<sup>50</sup> Love, Barbara J. *Feminists Who Changed America 1963-1975*. University of Illinois Press, 2006, pp. 327-328.

moved to Oregon. She also enjoyed expressing herself and her political identity through writing poems, creating songs, and playing guitar.<sup>51</sup> During her time in Oregon, Ruth would become an important figure in lesbian feminist photography, publishing *The Blatant Image* magazine between 1981 and 1983.<sup>52</sup>

Jean had attempted to bring some of the principles from her Quaker background into her social work in Los Angeles, but ended up leaving, frustrated with the bureaucracy which lacked adequate care and respect for the people it was supposed to support.<sup>53</sup> In 1970, she attended a conference at Pendle Hill, a Quaker Retreat Center in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, where she met Ruth. From there, she followed Jean to Southern Oregon, where they moved into a religious commune called Mountain Grove, taking their new last names as well. Though they were in love and living happily with their children from their previous marriages with men, the couple had not managed to integrate smoothly into the Mountain Grove community, as they were outwardly critical of the male leadership and did not get along well with other residents. Eventually, the men responsible for cutting and supplying firewood stopped coming by their house, so Ruth and Jean cut their own. They left Mountain Grove in 1973.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Grosjean, Shelley A. “‘Making Ourselves Real’: Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove in the Southern Oregon Lesbian-Feminist Community, 1970-1984.” Thesis, University of Oregon, June 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Root, Raechel Herron. “‘Herstory if Caught by the Camera’s Eye’: Photographers of Oregon’s Lesbian Lands,” Thesis, University of Oregon, June 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Burmeister, Heather Jo. “Rural Revolution: Documenting the Lesbian Land Communities of Southern Oregon.” Thesis, Portland State University, p. 74.

<sup>54</sup> Archibald, Sasha. “On Wimmin’s Land.” *Places Journal*, February 2021. <https://placesjournal.org/article/on-wimmins-land-the-heartland-of-lesbian-separatism/?cn-reloaded=1>

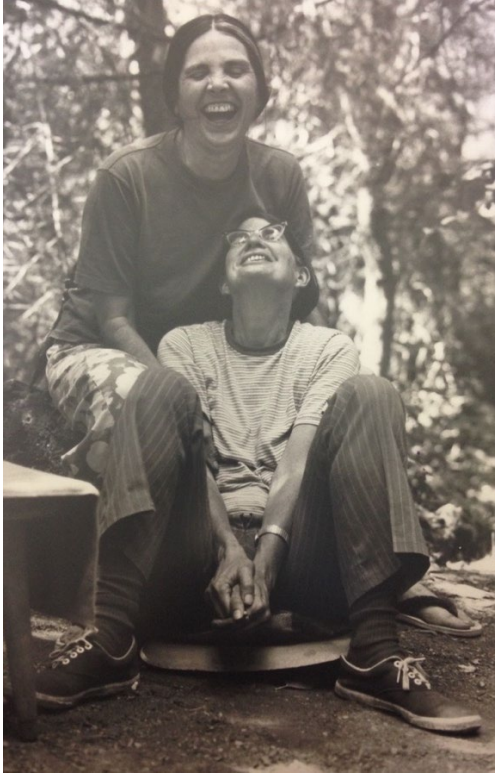


Figure 1. Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove



Figure 2. Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove with cabin at Golden

After leaving Mountain Grove, they headed towards northern California, where a group of women were living at T'ai Farm in Mendocino County. Carmen Goodyear and Jeanne Tetrault, the founders of the farm, published *Country Women* magazine from 1972 to 1979.<sup>55</sup> They sat on the floor, typing articles with an electric typewriter, and then glued the work on paper. After that, they sent it to be printed.<sup>56</sup> After the Mountaingroves accepted the opportunity to edit an upcoming special spirituality issue of *Country Women*, they returned to Oregon in 1974 to start their own women's magazine focused on spirituality. Carl Wittman and Allan Troxler, gay men who lived at Golden, offered to let Ruth and Jean stay on their land for free.<sup>57</sup> They published *WomanSpirit* there from 1974 to 1978, using a former chicken coop as an office. However, there was no electricity, so they often found all kinds of "strange little places" to work on the issues. They worked with women printers and women's bookstores in Eugene for production and distribution.<sup>58</sup>



Figure 3. Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove working on the first issue of *WomanSpirit* at Womanshare

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Burmeister, Heather. "Women's Lands in Southern Oregon: Jean Mountaingrove and Bethroot Gwynn Tell Their Stories." *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 115, No. 1, Spring 2014 p. 83.

<sup>57</sup> Archibald, "On Wimmin's Land."

<sup>58</sup> Burmeister, "Tell Their Stories," p 83.

In 1978, the Mountaingroves purchased their own land, and founded Rootworks, another lesbian community, on a seven-acre plot near Sunny Valley, Oregon. This change enabled them to increase their ability to organize and facilitate group work on *WomanSpirit* and other projects like the “ovular” photography workshops (contrary to the male “seminar”) and *The Blatant Image* magazine. Archivist Linda Long described Rootworks as a “perfect exemplar of the feminist-lesbian dream.”<sup>59</sup> Ruth and Jean, with the help of a crew of women, built Natalie Barney, a barn-like structure (named after the lesbian writer) with two stories, a pitched roof, and a dozen windows. The women used the space as a creative center and meeting place for Rootworks and the lesbian feminist community more broadly.<sup>60</sup>

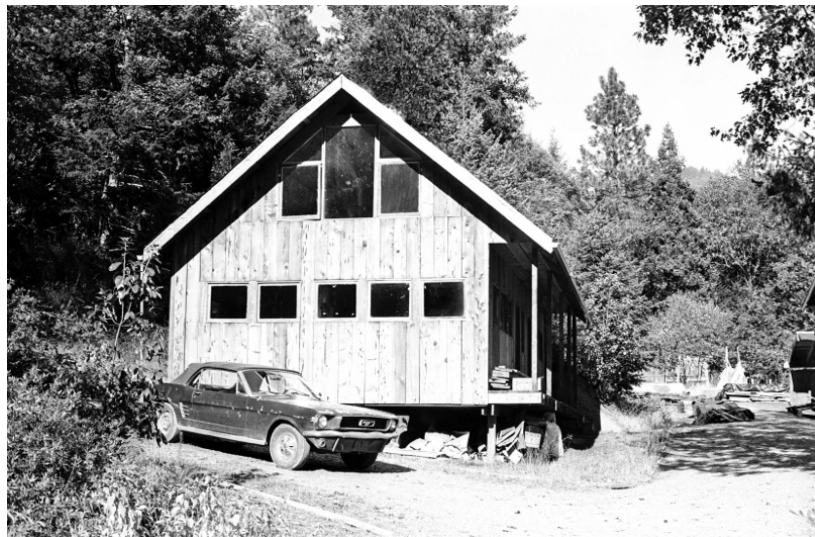


Figure 4. “Natalie Barney” at Rootworks

*WomanSpirit* is a magazine and a movement of women who accepted the authority of women’s experiences, celebrated the body, affirmed the place of humanity in the web of life, and invoked the divine power as goddess. It both documented and fostered the womanspirit movement, which overlaps with the goddess movement, feminist witchcraft/Wicca, feminist

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<sup>59</sup> Gage, Carolyn. “A Lesbian Archivist Discovers a Hidden Literary Treasure in Southern Oregon.” *The Lambda Book Report*, Spring/Summer 2008. <https://carolyngage.weebly.com/a-lesbian-archivist.html>

<sup>60</sup> Archibald, “On Wimmin’s Land.”

neopaganism, and ecofeminism. It has no recognized leaders, no creed, no single organizational structure, and no membership lists. It repudiates ties to inherited religious communities and rejects the New Age movement as well.<sup>61</sup>

*WomanSpirit* was the first lesbian feminist periodical entirely dedicated to feminism and spirituality and ran from 1974 to 1984. It was able to reach large audiences of women across the United States and the world, receiving occasional submissions from women in other countries. The open *WomanSpirit* Collective published the magazine first at Golden and Cabbage Lane, then on Rootworks women's land.<sup>62</sup> *WomanSpirit* reflected the spiritual interests of the lesbian feminist movement of the time, focusing on topics including feminist interpretations of astrology, healing, dream exploration, cosmic/plant/animal rhythms, story/myth telling, celebrations of group rituals, and the raising of woman-consciousness through chanting, dancing, and meditating.<sup>63</sup> The magazine is an effective source because of its span and its impact on all of the people who, for one reason or another, never actually made it to women's land. Many women and lesbians across the country received newsletters and publications like *WomanSpirit* in the mail, and they were able to send in their work to be included in upcoming issues. While lesbian/women's land was not an option for many people, participation in the alternative feminist press network which flourished during the 1970s and 1980s was much more accessible for women who were poor, racialized, married, working, disabled, or otherwise unable or unwilling to participate in going back to the land.

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<sup>61</sup> Kramarae, Cheris and Spender, Dale. "WomanSpirit." *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women's Issues and Knowledge*, Vol. 4, 2000, pp. 7170-7171.

<sup>62</sup> Gage, "A Lesbian Archivist."

<sup>63</sup> Dijk, Denise. "The Goddess movement in the U.S.A. A Religion for Women Only." *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, 1988, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 258-266. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23918114.pdf>

## CHAPTER TWO

### RUTH, JEAN, AND THE BEGINNING OF *WOMANSPiRIT*

When *WomanSpirit* was just getting started and Jean had to inquire about the postal regulations for mailing magazines, she worried about men trying to stop what they were doing. A few years later, she wrote “I believed then, and still do, that *WomanSpirit* is a potent means of changing the dominant sexist system.” And though the postal workers “saw a dowdy middle-aged woman,” she felt “like a new guerrilla recruit trying to get through enemy lines.”<sup>64</sup>

From its first issue, many of the contributors of *WomanSpirit* focused on the future, which would come about through the creation of women’s culture and the reconnection of women with their essential power and matriarchal “herstories.” The magazine was released quarterly, following the seasonal solstices and equinoxes, and the first issue of *WomanSpirit* was published in 1974 during the Autumn Equinox. The first piece is “Why WomanSpirit?” which begins:

“This is a crucial time for women. We have begun to understand and work through much of our oppression. We have made radical changes in our lives—we are becoming aware of the immensity of these changes. We are also seeing the directions our new ways of living are taking us. When we realize the political implications of all our struggles, we know that patriarchy cannot withstand our changes; something is going to happen. We are feeling stirrings inside us that tell us that what we are making is nothing less than a new culture.”<sup>65</sup>

While the “we” in *WomanSpirit* can be understood as the voice of the WomanSpirit collective, it can also be read as emphasizing women’s culture and lesbian life as actively developing and changing through the work and lives of women past, present, and future. *WomanSpirit* was both calling upon and speaking to a future society of women that is yet to come but also being

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<sup>64</sup> Mountaingrove, Jean. “My Struggle with my Power.” *WomanSpirit*, Summer 1977, pp. 29-31.

<sup>65</sup> “Why WomanSpirit?” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1974, p.1.



actively created, in the here and now of 1974, through mediums like alternative women's magazines.

The reach and influence of *WomanSpirit* is evident in the letters section of every issue, where women from all around the world, from different classes, and of different identities were able to contribute their thoughts to the discourse. In this way, lesbian feminist alternative press was a much more accessible way to engage with the women's movement compared to going back to the land to experiment with separatism. Mary, from Denver, Colorado, wrote to the magazine, saying "...You're doing fine work. A little too conservative, at times and possibly elitist intellectual, but very fine anyway."<sup>66</sup> Prairie Jackson, from Houston, Texas, wrote:

"You know, it seems like all the magical farout things never happen in Texas!!! In my heart I wish I could fly away and join in the dance... yet assuming a larger perspective, the dance goes on everywhere and we do not know when it will end. On full moons I feel our ties, and on stormlit nights, we meet at the crossroads of our souls. All the years we write and send messages... our lines close but never touch!"<sup>67</sup>

## POTENTIAL LESBIAN FEMINIST FUTURES

*WomanSpirit* focused on women's spirituality, and there were numerous interpretations of what a woman-centered spiritual practice could and should look like. In "What is this Goddess Business?" members of the WomanSpirit collective recorded and shared a conversation they had regarding an article featured in the same issue about Ishtar, an ancient Mesopotamian goddess of love, sexuality, and fertility. They were trying to understand whether an external goddess figure was the source of their power and spirituality or if that came from inside themselves. "I think we could help each other by creating this consciousness," explained Jean. "By beginning with the magazine, we can help other women get behind why they are so attracted to a goddess image. It

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<sup>66</sup> Mary. In "Letters." *WomanSpirit*, Winter 1976, p. 62.

<sup>67</sup> Jackson, Prairie. In "Letters" *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1976, p. 63.

is a mirror and we want to be those strong beautiful women.” She continued, “We’re all dropouts... I think it is important that we do not create ways for women to fail, because we have all had so much failure.” She believed that there was not simply one way to be a “feminist spiritual person” and that spiritual guilt trips were ineffective and harmful. However, on an intellectual level, she did not see a goddess-based spirituality as the best approach to a new belief system. Her spirituality was very closely linked to nature and her emotional experiences with the earth. “I think nature does love me. My body is a part like the stones and the trees,” she explained. “I belong here. I have a right to exist here. I don’t have to be apologetic or fearful about my presence or my needs.”<sup>68</sup> When a heteronormative and patriarchal society undermined the rights and existence of lesbian feminists, some found evidence of their worth and humanity in the natural world.

Lesbian feminist spirituality during this time was deeply invested in relationships with nature and reconnecting with the cycles of the Earth, moon, and stars. When these women imagined the future, they often emphasized an ecological perspective and respect for the environment. In “Explorations in the Grove,” Jean Mountaingrove shared some of her experience living on collective rural land. She wrote: “I feel I am walking slowly into a darkened space where the outline, shapes and presences are only gradually illumined. I am on a journey: back into time, forward into the future, down into my center... eternity is present.” For Jean, living in the wilderness brought forth visions of utopian potentiality and a different relationship to time. “Nature has become my beloved other. I want to tune myself to her rhythms and her ways. I see myself becoming more like a tree—the complete tree, above and below ground: steadfast and patient outwardly, flowing and delicate inwardly. I embrace the tree. I embrace my life.”<sup>69</sup> Her

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<sup>68</sup> Mountaingrove, Jean, et. al. “What is this Goddess Business?” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1976, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1974, p. 7

words emphasize the powerful connections between lesbian identity, nature, time, and the feminization of lesbian/women's land. Contributor Forest Hope, from London, echoed Jean's feelings when she hinted at the movements for women's land occurring outside of the United States, explaining that she was most in touch with her spirituality when she could "feel the connection with the earth and flow along with nature's changes. Our rhythms flowing together—that's spirituality."<sup>70</sup>

Jean also published some excerpts from her journal, titled "Growing My Plant Self," which further elucidates the connection between a new women's culture and an emphasis on nature and the Earth. She began by explaining how it was difficult for her to be vulnerable and share how she felt she was changing, but that her notes may be helpful to those "who are sprouting and pushing up through the heavy soil of the old culture." Around New Year's 1976, she wrote "I am now fifty; a turning point in my life. I am afraid of something; a turnaround...." She did not want to be "immobilized" by the tension between the "plant person" inside her who simply existed, without plans or directions, and the "planner" who was productive and rational. On January 16th, she wrote of

"the source of our lives; our mother, my mother... In Nature I sense *Mother*—the mother presence of all. When I returned to the Grove this fall, I realized that this spirit in Nature is my mother, and here is my obligation; to do as I intuit, going step by step as I am guided."

Ruth and Jean shared many of these experiences together. On January 22nd, Jean recalled "Ruth comes up the hill to share my pleasure and take photographs. Later she leaves me here. I lie in the circle. How lovely to sleep here in the summer under the stars!"

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<sup>70</sup> Hope, Forest. In "Letters" *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1976, p. 61.

Jean connected the work she was doing on the land to her emotional work, explaining “My need to garden is acting out the dream image of nourishing myself, cultivating my own creative environment. Now in the winter I realize I am Seed. My inner self is growing into a new world. Now I have made a garden for my spirit. What plant am I growing into?” In February, the WomanSpirit Collective visited Berkeley and Oakland. During their time there they cleaned up an abandoned yard to create a *WomanSpirit* garden, even though “no one has brought seeds.” Jean concluded this piece with a passage from February 16th, which reads:

“And what does it portend—that 8 women, un-noticed, dug in the earth for a little while one late February afternoon while all the huge city kept to its schedule and its iron-minded ways? Does it mean nothing? Or were seeds nurtured there which will grow like mustard seeds? The power of machines and traditional mind sits heavy around us. The power of women loving nature is an even older tradition, and we are in harmony with all the forces of nature. Maybe a seed is not such a “little thing.”<sup>71</sup>

The contributors of *WomanSpirit* and other rural lesbian separatists throughout the United States were deeply influenced by a “collective fantasy that lesbian separatists were descendants of ancient matriarchal cultures.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Ruth, in one of her book reviews, wrote “We are making a culture out of our fantasies.”<sup>73</sup>

Much of the more political content in *WomanSpirit* appears in their book reviews. Martha Kearns, in her review of *Beyond God the Father, Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* by Mary Daly, explained how the book’s “dreams soar us into a foreseeable nonsexist, nonracist future whose particulars are as yet unclear.” She indicated how the gathering of women in women’s spaces is crucial “because we have no place of our own in a misogynist world, a communal hope for the creation of new space, new person, a new society.” Though she agreed

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<sup>71</sup> Mountaingrove, Jean. “Growing My Plant Self.” *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1976, pp. 11-13.

<sup>72</sup> Thornton, “Go West, Young Dykes!” p. 50.

<sup>73</sup> Mountaingrove, Ruth. “Books for Women.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1976, p. 60.

with the author that the “women’s revolution” was the most important phenomenon happening at the time, she acknowledged that “we women in the women’s movement don’t always know what’s happening or where we’re going, though we do know why.”<sup>74</sup> The women who were participating in lesbian intentional communities and/or contributing to lesbian alternative press had uncertainties about what the future would look like, but they knew their queer ways of being could not thrive within the normative patriarchal world of the present. They sought to create a new world for themselves and those who were not yet here. Kearns also noted the importance of the past in imagining the future they would create through total revolution—“... when matriarchal systems were lived, a not-so-distant past as historians would like us to believe...”<sup>75</sup> Billie Miracle, a member of the WomanSpirit collective, expressed this idea in her writing on Moon Gatherings, as she claimed “We are women searching for our origins, searching for our past and our future.”<sup>76</sup> One unknown author, in recollecting the Wolf Creek Spiritual Gathering of July 1974, explained the necessity of “a community of women who share memories of the future” during what they consider “the Female Renaissance,” as they sow “the seeds of a new matriarchal vortex of spiritual energy...” Yet again, she expressed uncertainty—“Towards what ends?”<sup>77</sup>

Some people saw *WomanSpirit* as a separatist magazine, which Jean Mountaingrove had never thought of, and was discussed in a recorded conversation about separatism. “I just thought it would be really nice to have something that’s just totally woman’s space—woman’s images, woman’s art , everything pro-woman,” she explained. Because it was focused on women, to some readers it seemed separatist, and that “would make some women uncomfortable.” Jean

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<sup>74</sup> Kearns, Martha. “Hallelujah.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1974, pp. 11-13.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1974, p. 29

<sup>77</sup> “Wolf Creek Spiritual Gathering.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1974, pp. 32-33.

Patty argued “it’s lesbianism that makes some women uncomfortable; it’s threatening to them.” “We’re an eccentric magazine,” said Mountaingrove, “we’re trying to do something that hasn’t been done before, so there’s no standard for judging how well we’re doing it.”<sup>78</sup>

Thoughts and writings about time which were featured in *WomanSpirit* often had a strong astrological influence. In the first verse of a poem titled simply “Sun Gemini/Moon Capricorn-Aquarius,” contributor Devi wondered:

“What did we endure  
in our separate lives  
before we all met...

to lay in her bed one night  
yours the next  
and feel no guilt, no fear

to fix breakfast for you and your lover

though we are widely misunderstood  
those that would move this way  
are listening.”

In her third verse, Devi proclaimed “we are what we have waited for... we are moving beyond patience and time.”<sup>79</sup> This poem shows how lesbians were seeking more from their lives before the emergence of a bustling lesbian feminist culture. It expressed the desire for a queerer place and time where sleeping and eating with one’s lesbian lover could be ordinary and safe. This desire was part of what drew some lesbians to intentional communities in the countryside. Devi

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<sup>78</sup> Mountaingrove, Jean, et. al. “Separatism.” *WomanSpirit*, Winter 1976, pp. 51-53.

<sup>79</sup> Devi, “Sun Gemini/Moon Capricorn-Aquarius.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1974, p. 4.

also hints at the importance of astrological time cycles for lesbian feminist communities. Moving beyond time, lesbians seized the potential of the developing women's culture and the women's back-to-the-land movement and took their lives into their own hands, seeking happiness, pleasure, and a better world.

"We are living at a crucial time in world history," wrote Pelican, kicking off the second issue of *WomanSpirit* by arguing "we are experiencing the beginning of the collapse of western civilization. This is a time of change and upheaval." Astrology, she argued, could be a useful tool for thinking about chaos in one's personal life or the world more broadly. She explained how "the western scientific concept of progress is as straight lines; each new development is 'superior' to that which came before," creating an argument that indicates how lesbians used astrology in opposition to early ideas of "straight time."

The upcoming Age of Aquarius was of immense importance for many of the writers focused on spiritual submissions to *WomanSpirit*. Every 2,160 years, the constellation the sun rises against shifts, and the next constellation in line is Aquarius. Depending on which astrological calendar one follows, the Age of Aquarius is either upcoming, or we are already in it, and may have been since around the beginning of the twenty-first century. The shift prior to this one was from Aries into Pisces and occurred around the time of the birth of Christ.<sup>80</sup> Pelican described the Piscean Age as being "dominated by Christianity and the Roman political form." With the destruction of old Piscean forms, she insisted

"we can focus our lives instead on the creative and positive energies of sowing the seed for the new Age... We must transform ourselves. This means breaking down our attachments to Piscean conditions, both material and cultural, and giving up the so-called advantages and comforts of modern living. Those willing and able to

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<sup>80</sup> Lachman, Gary. *Turn Off Your Mind: The Mystic Sixties and the Dark Side of the Age of Aquarius*, The Disinformation Company, 2001, P. 6.

take self-liberating steps can group themselves in communities on the fringe of society to develop a new spirit and new ways of relating to each other.”

She placed women’s lands within the context of the shift between astrological ages, setting land lesbians directly in the center of this spiritual movement. She also argued that women are in a unique position to resist and refuse Piscean ways of life, as the Piscean Age was dominated by masculine energies. She wrote

“By living in the country we are free from the structure and the limits of cities, straight jobs, electricity, machines. We are learning that we don’t need these things—that we can be free from the limits imposed by them. We are free to be more creative with our lives, to create a new culture with our lives... We are learning to relate to each other in new ways. We are breaking away from the Piscean forms of heterosexual marriage and isolated nuclear families.”<sup>81</sup>

Pelican’s linkage of heteronormativity and the nuclear family with astrology shows how some lesbian feminists of the time combined history, fantasy, alternative forms of spirituality, gender, and sexuality in their ideas of lesbian pasts and futures.

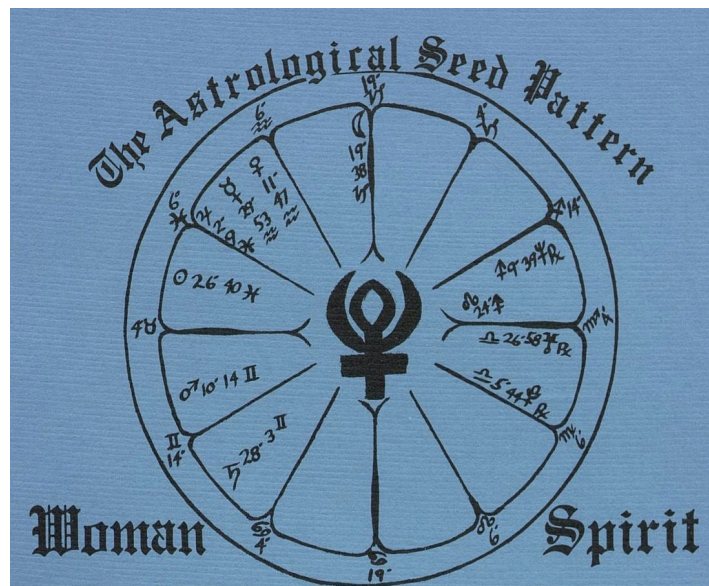


Figure 5. “The Astrological Seed Pattern: WomanSpirit.”

<sup>81</sup> Pelican, “Birth of a New Age.” *WomanSpirit*, Winter 1974, pp. 2-3.



One contributor, Marcia Starchild, from San Francisco, calculated the birth-chart of *WomanSpirit* as it came to Jean and Ruth as an idea during their work on *Country Women*. She explained that this chart shows “the Sun in Pisces, Moon in Capricorn, Venus and Mercury in Aquarius, Uranus and Pluto in Libra and Neptune in Sagittarius.” According to her interpretation of *WomanSpirit*’s zodiac,

“The placement of the Sun in Pisces in the 12th house indicates to me that the purpose of *WomanSpirit* is to spiritualize and transcend the shadows and ghosts of our present society while fostering seeds for the future generation. The best way to actualize the Sun in Pisces is to be able to respond to the ever changing needs of women and to reflect the inner nature of women and the public at large. I feel that *WomanSpirit* will be a continual emergence of creative seeds from the depths of the collective unconscious.”<sup>82</sup>

Contributor Hallie Mountainwing, from Berkeley, California, expanded upon her idea of feminist temporality by arguing that “changing our concept of time is one way we can take back control over our lives. We have grown up in a society which regards time, as it does everything else, in a very linear way.” She linked this to capitalism and the forty-hour work week, and insisted upon a “right to live by our natural cycles.” She also provided the information to order “Sister Heathenspinster’s Almanac and Lunation Calendar for 1976,” which was a “good way to remind yourself to get off the old linear, profit-oriented track” if one was interested in living “life in a more organic and female way.”<sup>83</sup> “The Day Before” datebook from Diana Press<sup>84</sup> was another lesbian product which represents how some lesbian feminists were interested in looking

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<sup>82</sup> *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1976, p.65.

<sup>83</sup>These were sold for \$2.00 from Old Lady Blue Jeans, a Massachusetts-based distributor of lesbian products and culture. They worked “with the belief that whatever we create reflects our herstory, our present, and our future, and must be shared.” Raymond, Kaymarion. “The Egg.” *From Wicked to Wedded*, Northampton’s LGBTQ History, Sept. 28, 2019. <https://fromwickedtowedded.com/tag/old-lady-blue-jeans/>

<sup>84</sup>Feminist print shop and publishing house based in Baltimore, Maryland until a relocation to Oakland, California in 1977. Dean, Courtney. “Finding Aid for the Diana Press records, 1970-1994 (Collection 2135)” UCLA Library Special Collections, [https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8tq62h1/entire\\_text/](https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8tq62h1/entire_text/)

to the matriarchal past in order to break through the present and build a new culture. “It is rather mind-boggling to be writing down appointments for the patriarchal, linear-time-oriented society that most of us live in,” wrote Mountainwing, “while reading about and looking at reminders of a world that was, and will be, so completely different.”<sup>85</sup>

Some women noticed how their relationship to the world and the objects within it was changing, seemingly during every moment. “A typewriter used to be a sign of my oppression as a woman,” wrote Helen McKenna, in excerpts from her journal from 1973. “But now it is so much more. Now it is part of the creative process, part of something beautiful, something that puts me in touch with the heavens, with the soul, with ecstasy sometimes, with spiritual things.” Her negative feelings about the typewriter had been lost almost completely, and “only exist in my memory, as part of the past. But the typewriter in my present is now something I love.” Writing was an empowering experience for many women, which is one of the reasons why alternative feminist press experienced a kind of cultural awakening during this time—*WomanSpirit* is just one of many queer feminist magazines from this time period. When McKenna was writing, she felt in touch with a spiritual and temporal sense of freedom. “When I am free,” she wrote, “I am not really alone. I feel that I am in touch with other free spirits, with those all through the past, and into the future, creatures who know what freedom is. Then I am not alone.” And it was through writing that McKenna and other women felt they could “change the consciousness of the people of this country.”<sup>86</sup>

In 1977, *WomanSpirit* published a Summer Solstice issue on Anger, Strength, and Power. In it, Jean described her struggle with her own power over the magazine. By having worked on every single issue for the previous three years, she felt “caught in inequality” with the other

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<sup>85</sup> Mountainwing, Hallie. “On To Wommon Time,” *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1976, p. 7.

<sup>86</sup> McKenna, Helen. “From My Journal,” *WomanSpirit*, Summer 1977, p. 19.

people who contributed to and worked on the magazine. When they began *WomanSpirit*, Jean wanted to change both herself and the world. And through producing it, she became much more comfortable acting as a “boss” and a leader. She found satisfaction and recognition which she did not find in the countless projects she worked on in the patriarchal world. She cared for the magazine with a passion and felt that engaging with power in the women’s movement was “essential” for her development as a whole person. “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.” Indeed. While Jean certainly played an important role in the development and production of *WomanSpirit*, she knew that she “gained strength from many women—who write, who visit us, whom we meet wherever we go.” And above all, she had Ruth. She explained, “... mainly I am sustained by my partner Ruth, who has different strengths than I do. I have learned much about myself and about the world from testing myself in relationship to her. That is a book in itself, and maybe someday it will be.”

While a lot of lesbian feminists wrote and dreamed of a future based on love and compassion, they also held a lot of anger. “Why is anger so hard to talk about?” was the question which began a recorded conversation on “Angry Women” in the 1977 issue. “I’m not in touch with my anger very much,” said Jean, but she acknowledged that “my anger is me, too... [and] my anger is not a mistake. I’m not wrong to be angry.” Ebon noted how “anger at that world out there is what kept me going... it kept me from going under and giving in and being a victim. It kept me alive.” Crystal thought “the women’s movement was founded on women and their anger, and look what’s become of it.” Ash remembered when she “worked as a cashier for 1.25 an hour,” and had to suppress a lot of anger. “All the jobs I’ve had—cashier or salesgirl or

typist—there was no way to express anything.” Many lesbian feminists held anger from living under patriarchal power structures, and those who sought a life on the land brought this anger with them. Whether they knew how to manage and process it, or if the cycle continued and they lashed out at their community, was on an individual basis. Jean heard similar statements repeated by women like “I love my sisters, but I’m getting trashed by them.”

“...what about all this great rage from the patriarchal dominant culture?” wondered Jean. “I think as feminists we should deal with that anger too... Once I know how to handle my anger, I think I’ll be much more ready to interact with men again,” linking her anger to separatism. “But right now I don’t feel that I have any protection or any defense against what I get from men, so I don’t want to be out there defenseless.” Even though their oppression under patriarchy left them filled with an intense rage, Kalyna and the other people in this discussion insisted they would never want to trade places with men. “I feel that even though they have this superficial power over me, they’re really in bad places... and they are really unhappy,” explained Kalyna. “And their life is really lacking a whole lot, and I would much rather be where I am... I just feel much happier being a woman than I know they feel about being a man.” Ruth agreed, saying “They don’t have anything real.” Jean noted how “We have the women’s movement and what do men have? They don’t have anything hopeful for the future. And we have each other and a consciousness of changing together... we want to create a whole new world.”<sup>87</sup>

The title of this thesis comes from an essay by *WomanSpirit* contributor, author, and activist Baba Copper, called “Changing Our Image of the Future.” She began by describing two versions of patriarchal futures presented by the optimists and pessimists. The pessimists presented a picture of “nuclear waste pollution; world-wide deforestation; reactor accidents; the

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<sup>87</sup> Mountaingrove, Jean, et. al. “Angry Women.” *WomanSpirit*, Summer 1977, pp. 4-10.

death of the oceans; disastrous climate modifications; mass starvation; accelerating cancer epidemics; ozone and other biosphere destruction; [and] non-renewable resource depletion.” The optimists, on the other hand, described “space colonies, cloning, machine intelligence, genetic engineering, fusion, chemical learning, behavior modification, weather control, microsurgery, underseas habitats, time travel by deep-freezing, sophisticated robots, synthetic foods, [and] artificial life.” Copper insisted that these visions were “death images of the future” which either surrendered to or denied challenges from the environment. People struggled to imagine positive images of the future because they were “captive in the present to interpretations of past experience” which indicated that the undoing of our “destructive path” as a species was impossible. Furthermore, she argued that “when technology becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to the fulfillment of a socially utopian goal, then all culture suffers,” criticizing normative narratives of endless human progress.

Copper was interested in “liberating the future from the absence of hope,” and argued that “the momentum imposed by linear time shapes the future like a straight jacket.” According to her, the patriarchal inability to imagine positive possibilities for the future resulted from erroneous “assumptions about the nature of time,” mainly the assumption that there is a right to the production and reproduction of the resources of the Earth, other species, coerced labor, and the bodies of women, along with the myth of duality. “So permeating is the myth of duality—male and female as necessary opposites—that we close our minds to the biological possibilities of our origins,” wrote Copper. Rather than continuing down this line of thinking in the way one might today, by embracing the possibility of intersex identity, chromosomal variation, and overall conceptions of gender and sex as fluid, flexible, and ever-changing, Copper invested further into gender and sex binaries. She included an excerpt from Grace Shinell’s “Woman’s

Primacy in the Coming Reformation,” which said “The female of the species is not the opposite of the male—rather she contains the male form, among other possible variations. The female is the matrix from which all mutation occurs. Biologically males are mutants.”

Copper pointed out how both the environmental movement and the women’s liberation movement had risen to create new and non-patriarchal visions and possibilities for the future. “To see clearly the ‘end-state’ desired—not simply the reforms of the present reality, but the ideal, the utopian goal, the vision we do not know how to achieve—is a political act, an act of power.” One possible world which Copper and other women were setting forth was “a world in which the feminist goal of women’s control over women’s bodies is fully realized.” “I need to go there,” wrote Copper, “to make it more real so I will call it the Times of Wimmin and I will speak of it in the present tense. Go with me into the future, well advanced into the Times of Wimmin,” calling upon the reader. For her, the most important value of the Times of Wimmin is consent, as she imagines a world without rape. This piece seems to assume that men are the sole perpetrators of rape—which is wholly untrue: “Imagine with me a world without rape—without the rape of women by men, or men by men, or children by men, and without the rape of the body of the Earth—her forests and fields and mountains and waters...” Her vision of the future was based on both consent and pleasure. “In the Times of Wimmin, the immediate goal of sexuality/sensuality is pleasure. However, sex is also a path of communication; of self-listening and listening to another; of learning the lessons of vulnerability.”

Copper concluded her article by insisting, “Not only our past, but our future is stolen from us. Since our present is the point of action between these two, we remain impaled on the

patriarchy within us. Magic is reality manipulation. There are NO future facts, only possibilities.”<sup>88</sup>

## WHOSE FUTURE?

I must acknowledge the exoticization and veneration of people of color and Indigenous culture in *WomanSpirit*, as well as the general lack of racial awareness of many of the contributors. Ellen, for example, from Northampton, Massachusetts, argued that as white women, “it is we who are the minority since the majority of the world’s people are people of color.” She also insisted that *WomanSpirit* had much work to do if it was to garner a diverse, international audience, and that work needed to begin with working through “our personal racism and classism.” She acknowledged that many of the spiritual practices of the lesbian feminist movement took from Indigenous cultures and other cultures of people of color, including the I Ching and the use of peyote. “...We must be careful,” she argued, “not to participate in cultural rip-off and be conscious and respectful of these modes,” which is easier said than done.<sup>89</sup> Much of the spiritual content of the magazine does not align with this ethic. For example, Rootworks exists on and around the land of the Takelma, Tolowa Dee-ni’ and Cow Creek Umpqua nations. While some of the *WomanSpirit* collective and its contributors knew about the displacement of Indigenous people, an active engagement with Indigenous sovereignty or settler colonialism and residency on lesbian lands was rare.<sup>90</sup>

Another contributor, Deborah, wrote that she thought it would be a good idea for a group of women “to form a ritual magic society to create rituals that everyone can use, drawing on

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<sup>88</sup> Copper, Baba. “Changing Our Image of the Future.” *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1980, pp. 6-9.

<sup>89</sup> Ellen. “Notes on Classism and Racism.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1978, p. 10.

<sup>90</sup> Root, Raechel Herron. “‘Herstory if Caught by the Camera’s Eye’: Photographers of Oregon’s Lesbian Lands.” Thesis, University of Oregon, June 2020, p. 8.

witchcraft, native American traditions, and their own imaginations.” This idea suggests a historical view of Indigeneity as something in the past, rather than the accepting the reality of Indigenous people living and breathing in the here and now. It is also unaware of the possibility that at least some of these Native traditions, which many lesbian feminists were inspired by and drawing from at the time, may have been closed practices. A closed practice is one which is meant to be performed only by members of a certain community in order to protect the practice’s cultural, historical, and political meaning. An example of a closed practice includes smudging with white sage or palo santo, which is closed in order to ensure Indigenous people have access to the plants and resources they need for their spiritual practice. The concept of a closed practice was certainly not considered by most contributors to *WomanSpirit*.<sup>91</sup>

Though much of the lesbian feminist writing from this time described a collective and inclusive new culture where all women could participate and thrive under a return to matriarchy, other contributors, often women of color, city women, and/or working-class women, expressed warranted skepticism. A Native woman, Flying Thunderwoman, wrote:

“I hate it when I go to read something that says ‘... our woman’s culture’ or ‘matriarchy and us’ or ‘our goddesses long ago’ and read on and come to fynd that it really meant for whyte women only... Jes lyke their whyte brothers. Don’t yall know I/we exist? That we, too, read these magazines? Shit... I can’t stand it anymore. The anger and rage and frustrations I feel... To put it bluntly and to get to the point. You and I support the genocycle that has happened hundreds or years before us [sic] and is still happening ryte now—TODAY! The power of the dollar... Anytyme you think in terms of ‘progress and development’ you exploit.”

Continuing, she implored, “Look at the whyte man in Canada, in So. America, in Hawaiian Islands, in the U.S., in Africa... even OUTER SPACE!... and yet nobody fytes him...” she insisted, “Nobody ‘cept natives. Cuz they know. They know there ain’t no freedom in the whyte-

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<sup>91</sup> For more on indigenous identity and settler colonialism on lesbian lands, see Shweighofer, Katherine. “A land of one’s own: whiteness and indigeneity on lesbian land.” *Settler Colonial Studies*, 2018, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 489-506.



man's-way." From her perspective, "He lies, he steals, he kills, he cheats, he oppresses. He hurts and he ruins—his lust is wealth. He has no eyeballs in his head, only dollar signs and when he sees lyke that he has no humanness and he'll do anything." She also advocated a separatist approach:

"I'm beginning to see how we need to totally withdraw our energy from the patriarchy all together... get our of the cities [sic] get enlytened, take our freedom that is naturally ours. Not even bother to ask them for a little bit of freedom. Claim not buy land back. Not pay any taxes. Get our heads together. Not in the cities, that's the man-made world! But out here, on great mother spirit land, where we can know and feel our magick. Our power. Our strength. COME ON SISTERS!!"

Speaking directly to her "dear beautyfull black and third world sisters," Flying Thunderwoman wrote that

"The whyte ones, they are very good at sittin around and talking... and talking... and talking—about doing something... something lyke building/creating a matriarchy... but I ask Where? And When? And How? And for whyte women only? These are good sisters, they need us women of colour and native-rooted culture. They need us, not to teach them, but to show them our different ways and to dryve the whyte man, the oppressor, out of here. They speak out against him and what he does and yet they carry around and apply his teachings, his way of thought."<sup>92</sup>

On the other hand, in "A View of the Moon from the City Streets," a collection of essays from multiple contributors in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the accessibility of separatism was called into question. They asked "...who will be capable of such separation? The logical response is: those who have the material resources to do so. This unquestionably has everything to do with money and the power which accompanies it."<sup>93</sup> Indeed, many of the women who were able to buy land to create collectives had money from inheritances and came from wealthier families. In

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<sup>92</sup> Thunderwoman, Flying. "Notes of a Native Woman." *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1976, pp. 24-26.

<sup>93</sup> Cohen, Sherrie, et.al. "A View of the Moon From the City Streets." *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1976, pp. 17-21.

some communities, people were pressured to collectivize their money, which harmed poor and working women who needed that money if they were to return to the city for any reason. And some were expelled from their collective if they did not want to share their funds.<sup>94</sup> The authors continued, arguing that “the ultimate and total separatism envisioned by women in the spirituality movement cannot succeed as the only strategy for revolution.” Not only was direct confrontation with patriarchy necessary from their perspective as “politically active feminists,” but they “also recognize that our material conditions place us in daily contact with men.”<sup>95</sup> In a letter she submitted to the Winter 1976 issue, Jackie Lapidus from Paris, France, insisted that “The only reason I am not living a separatist life, actually, is that I have to eat. I certainly would not choose to live the life I do live for any other reason other than economic. Most of the women I know are in that situation too.”<sup>96</sup>



Figure 6. Jean Mountaingrove and La Verne Gagehabib pictured together on the right

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<sup>94</sup> Paz, Juana Maria. *The La Luz Journal*, Paz Press, 1980, p. 11.

<sup>95</sup> Cohen. “A View of the Moon.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1976, pp. 17-21.

<sup>96</sup> Lapidus, Jackie. In “Letters.” *WomanSpirit*, Winter 1976, p. 62.

La Verne Gagehabib, who was mentioned in chapter one, also contributed to *WomanSpirit*. When she reviewed Barbara Smith's *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography* (1981), she wrote "I've waited all my life for this book. It is such a joy for me to have it in my hands." She saw *Black Lesbians* as the first of many publications to come which would promote the visibility of Black lesbians and other queer women of color. "It is comforting to know that I can now look forward to future publications within the Lesbian and women's communities that have included at least something about Black lesbians," she explained, and argued that "Never before has it been more necessary to become visible, and connect with each other, than now in this century."<sup>97</sup>

Malflora Mawn, from New Mexico, shared some of her difficulties and rewarding experiences as a "third world woman" living in the country. "My God became the hills," she said, describing the "dew dripped leaves and trees in all seasons, flittering butterflies [sic] and all sorts of exciting life around me." It was a romantic experience, her first true experience of nature "as she was really meant to be." And "coming from the ghettos of Los Angeles, this seemed like a paradise..." She found a serene and nostalgic sense of peace on women's lands, though "here I do not meet very many other third world women and sometimes I get lonely for colorful cultures I can relate to." She noted the economic privileges more accessible to white women, which made it easier for them to live on women's land. The women in New Mexico, "both third world and white, need some help in getting over the conditioning of our different backgrounds. But we are, I think, open and willing to accept change in our lives."<sup>98</sup>

Juana Gonzales, who also went by Juana Maria Paz, sent in excerpts from her work, *The La Luz Journal*, which recounted her experiences in intentional communities as a Puerto Rican

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<sup>97</sup> Gagehabib, La Verne. "I've Waited All My Life." *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1981, p. 37.

<sup>98</sup> Mawn, Malflora. "We Are All Daughters of the Mother." *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1977, pp. 44-46.

lesbian feminist mother, including Nourishing Space in Vail, Arizona, La Luz de la Lucha in Oroville, California, and OWL Farm in Roseburg, Oregon. In it, she also described her often overwhelming love for Flying Thunderwoman, mentioned above, and the emotional rollercoaster of their relationship, which began when they met at La Luz. “And so I have come to the end of the rainbow,” begins Paz, writing about La Luz, which was meant to be women’s land for third world women only. “There is nothing here that I have not seen before in another shape or form. And there is everything that I ran away from, only different.” She was sick of power and found that she could not escape the power structures which so many attempted to leave behind in the cities. “To what purpose do I roam the earth, to what end?” She wondered, “I am tired of looking, tired of searching, tired of compromises forced on me by those in power.” She seemed to be experiencing a kind of existential crisis:

“Perhaps I am a madwoman roaming the earth in search of a vacuum where I might find peace. And perhaps it is simply a long process from subjugation to freedom and it cannot be done in our lifetime. Perhaps we move in different worlds, these women and I, perhaps their reality is different from mine. Perhaps my language is foreign to them and my words fall around their circle like dead leaves sinking in the earth, forgotten, before they rise again in another form.”

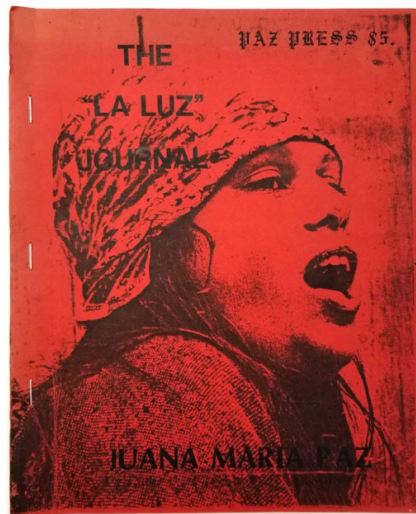


Figure 7. Cover of *The “La Luz” Journal* by Juana Maria Paz

Sensing that escaping systems of power was more difficult than simply leaving the patriarchal cities, Paz felt lost. Roaming between lands accompanied by her young daughter had left her unsatisfied. Still, she imagined a better future not yet here, even as she worried about aging and losing the chance to find herself:

“I want to be happy and I want to find peace. I want to relax my body and unfold my mind. I want to attain a spirituality that is beyond violence or power or pettiness... I want to stop raging battles and burning bridges long enough to find myself. I feel another self deep inside me, waiting, indeed, screaming to get out. I fear that if I do not find that self now, in my youth, it will be lost to me forever.”<sup>99</sup>

She turned 28 in the summer of 1980, so she was 26 when she wrote these words.<sup>100</sup> She concludes by asking, “Is anywhere a woman happy or is that another illusion, an empty ideal that is held up to keep us quiet? Perhaps happiness is the ideal unattainable and the only satisfaction is in striving. I don’t know. I just don’t know.”<sup>101</sup>

## THE MOVE TO ROOTWORKS

In the summer of 1978, the *WomanSpirit* collective was working out of a “woman-built office” at Golden/Cabbage Lane, in Wolf Creek, having upgraded from the former chicken coop. They admitted that while *WomanSpirit* production was going well, outside of their office space there had been “mounting tension with the gay men and women who hold the deed to this land.” One of the central disagreements was over separatism, which “sounds absolute, but in reality, it is always degrees across a spectrum.” “To us,” the editors explained, “it has never meant violence, man-hating, or total exclusion of men from our lives.” Instead, it involves focusing on their “sisters to develop skills and strengths of mind, body and spirit.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Paz, Juana Maria. “Impressions...” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1978, p. 61.

<sup>100</sup> Paz, *La Luz Journal*, p. 13.

<sup>101</sup> Paz, “Impressions...” p. 61.

<sup>102</sup> WomanSpirit Collective. “WomanSpirit.” *WomanSpirit*, Summer 1978, p. 3.

Ruth and Jean tried to find solutions by talking with the women's community. "After five years of living and working here, they're being forced to leave," wrote Caroline Overman, in excerpts from her journal, "They have land nearby to move to, but fear they'll meet the same problems again if they aren't solved here." And while the Mountaingroves were committed to non-violence, they didn't feel much support for that ideal in the broader women's community, where some people found it fitting to use violence against the violent patriarchy.<sup>103</sup> Before they moved, they took the time to grieve and separate themselves from "the cabin, the office and our special places on the mountain and in the woods," mourning the end of a significant era in their lives. Golden was their home and where they founded *WomanSpirit*. Their departure also meant that friendships had been damaged and certain illusions had been shattered.

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<sup>103</sup> Overman, Caroline. "Notes from my journal." *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1978, p. 8.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CRISIS ENVIRONMENTALISM

Throughout the 1970s, most of the mainstream environmental movement shifted towards a focus on lawsuits in federal courts and lobbies to Congress, adopting a strategy of working within the federal government to acquire legal protections for nature.<sup>104</sup> This development meant these environmental groups embraced the processes and institutions of liberal democratic politics, as some believed the best way to hold powerful polluters accountable was through “the power of government” and “the authority of the regulatory state.”<sup>105</sup>

At the same time, other environmentalists were dissatisfied with settling for gradual and conventional reforms, seeing federal politics as inadequate means to prevent “social and ecological collapse.” Some more radical environmentalists believed that “the human impact on the natural world was approaching a breaking point beyond which lay certain catastrophe.” They insisted that “the nation and the world had reached a crucial moment in which humanity would save itself and the planet or assure the destruction of both.” For these crisis environmentalists, “crisis was the precondition for casting doubt on traditional methods of reform and for advocating extreme measures.”<sup>106</sup> From their perspective, the sense of urgency and imminent disaster made the gradualism and indecisiveness of democratic governance particularly frustrating. These radicals often argued that the more urgent a given political issue, the less effective democratic governments were, failing to act swiftly and carry out necessary actions.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Woodhouse, Keith Makoto. *The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism*. Columbia University Press, 2018, pp. 56-57.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

The most well-known crisis environmentalist was Paul Ehrlich, who published *The Population Bomb* (1968) to warn people about “the peril of overpopulation” and the “simple fact of finite natural resources.” Crisis environmentalist literature offered both obvious and subtle critiques of “the modern assumption of endless consumption” following the increased American affluence of the 1950s. Viewing the world in terms of environmental crisis meant rejecting it in its then-current form.<sup>108</sup> Keith Makoto Woodhouse argued that crisis environmentalism had two key characteristics—it was oriented toward people and the future. He noted that while the radical “ecocentrists” of the 1980s would worry most about the destruction of nature and the environment, crisis environmentalists prioritized the fate of humanity. The futurity of crisis environmentalists involved “a certainty about its dire condition.”<sup>109</sup>

## A FRESH START

Once they had developed a sense of closure after being pressured to leave Cabbage Lane, the Mountaingroves “became free to plan a future closer to [their] visions.” Though it was not ideal to move locations again, after disagreements had already forced Ruth and Jean to move from Mountain Grove to Golden, the eviction presented a chance to shape their futures with a greater degree of control. This future was unclear, “but it feels like an opening and an opportunity.” They planned to move, produce the winter edition of *WomanSpirit*, and then “center and heal ourselves and listen to the land,” getting to know their new home, Rootworks, which had been lived on by women since 1975.<sup>110</sup>

Meanwhile, production of the magazine continued. The editors and contributors to *WomanSpirit* often explicitly connected their spirituality and their politics. Shannon began a

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 68-71.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., pp. 72-73.

<sup>110</sup> WomanSpirit Collective. “WomanSpirit.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1978, p. 11.



“non-linear conversation” in 1978 by arguing “that the only way women are going to get their Mother Right in the patriarchy is through some kind of psychic thing.” Consciousness-raising practices were a key aspect of second-wave feminism—especially for the most spiritual lesbian feminists. “You know who has control of the weapons and the bombs and the control of the government,” insisted Shannon, “I really believe for us to be able to overthrow the patriarchy it will be through our psychic abilities.” Sherry continued this train of thought, asserting the importance of women’s social, spiritual, and political work “because it has to do with reality.” She saw the current system in power as ignorant of the importance of what is real, perceiving “reality in only one dimension.” She connected her view of the future with her political beliefs, saying “... my vision is just part of my politics.” Jean agreed, noting how “They’ve ignored most of women’s reality.” To them, feminism was seen as a means to “put a whole new interpretation on reality” and create an entirely new vision of the world. “If you look around, [men] have all these monstrous machines destroying everything. They build these horrible structures and just litter the landscape with them,” she lamented, “and this is all a projection of their inner psyches... it’s why this technological civilization looks so awful, angry, and destructive—New York City, the local dumps, and the rivers...” The woman’s culture they saw themselves as developing in opposition to patriarchy was a “projection of [their] inner psychic space.” Ruth asked if that was how one could make their own reality, by projecting their inner psyche and women’s culture. “You know,” responded Sue, “I think it is.” Closing the conversation, Jean mentioned “I’ve heard a lot of women say they feel that times are going to be heavy, and we’ve gotta get our strengths together in some way or another. I think we’re all having this sense of that impendingness—but with different kinds of visions of what that is.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> WomanSpirit Collective. “A non-linear conversation on spirituality and politics.” *WomanSpirit*, Summer 1978, pp. 5-9.



Figure 8. Ovular II photography workshop

After about one year at Rootworks, the *WomanSpirit* collective shared their experiences from “this cycle” saying that “... our roots have begun to find the nourishment we need.” The first vegetables from the garden were cabbages, and their first visions included the photography “ovulars.”<sup>112</sup> “I see feminist photography as empowering women,” explained Ruth, “to become the independent, strong happy woman who lives in each of us [sic].” She aimed to capture both strength and beauty. Visibility was paramount.<sup>113</sup> As always, their social and artistic work was carried out with an emphasis on the environment.

“We are aware that our presence changes this land for the plants and creatures of our Mother Earth’s family... we have dedicated the work in the *WomanSpirit* workshop to the spirits of the trees whose bodies support us and surround us there, and whose branches shelter us and renew our spirits. We ask each of you, dear woman spirits, to adopt a tree who needs your care. Nourish her and she will nourish you.”

Finally, *WomanSpirit* had a proper home, and enough space for back issues, the production process, meetings, darkroom work, and visitors. Even so, they wondered, “Will we

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<sup>112</sup> *WomanSpirit* Collective, “WomanSpirit News.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1979, p. 56.

<sup>113</sup> Mountaingrove, Ruth. “Seeing a Feminist Vision.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1979, p. 49.

have the womanenergy to continue?”<sup>114</sup> Though living in the wilderness did take a lot of energy, “Rootworks herself [was] blossoming—more figuratively than literally” by Ruth’s 57th birthday in 1980. The Mountaingroves had added ditches to the main road and gravel to the parking area along with sixteen new fruit and nut trees, with blueberries, grapes, and raspberries coming soon. The circular vegetable garden would be added in between producing issues of the magazine. “We welcome sisters to Rootworks,” expressed Jean, “for the mutual gifts we are to each other.”<sup>115</sup>

### NUCLEAR POWER: A WOMEN’S CRISIS

On March 28, 1979, the second unit of the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant had a partial meltdown beginning at around 4 a.m. when equipment issues, design flaws, and worker mistakes resulted in the most serious accident in U.S. commercial nuclear power plant operating history. The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission reacted by increasing its regulatory oversight, and there were immense changes made in the nuclear industry regarding emergency response plans, reactor operator training, radiation protection, and more.<sup>116</sup> Three Mile Island subsequently became the focus of the nuclear debate for many people, including some lesbian feminists.

The contributors to *WomanSpirit* had focused on nature and the environment from the beginning, as they saw their oppression as women as linked to the destruction of the earth by patriarchal forces. Many of them also linked their spirituality to the earth. People did not submit work related to nuclear power to the magazine until the late 1970s, and it remained a topic of

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<sup>114</sup> *WomanSpirit* Collective, “WomanSpirit News.” p. 56.

<sup>115</sup> Mountaingrove, Jean. “WomanSpirit.” *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1980, p. 43.

<sup>116</sup> United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission. “Backgrounder on the Three Mile Island Accident.” Nov 15, 2022. <https://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/fact-sheets/3mile-isle.html>

discussion until it ended in 1984. There are a few women who implored readers to pay attention to the inevitability of a nuclear environmental crisis prior to Three Mile Island. One contributor wrote as “Your Mother, the Earth” in a letter addressed to the “children of the Earth” from 1978. In this piece, the Earth speaks urgently. “If we continue to function as we have in the past we will destroy ourselves. You, my children of earth, are killing me, Mother Earth.” An emphasis on sustainability and environmentalism, is just “one meaning of the new age” which could include the normalization and widespread adoption of practices like composting, the creation of city and rooftop gardens, and more natural burials which enable nutrients to return to the earth. “I’m tired of feeling this bad all the time,” the Earth complained, “you have no idea what it is like to have nuclear waste eating through your vital organs. Or maybe—you do.” This personified Earth called upon the reader to “create a new world through the guidance and protection of Limitless Love and Trust.”<sup>117</sup>

Contributor Laura Wilensky, from Windsor, Vermont, insisted that “the growth of nuclear power in the U.S. and abroad can no longer be ignored,” because “all who live on the earth are affected.” People needed to decide what they prioritized— “more electrical appliances and bigger private cars, or a more liveable earth which knows peace through co-operation.” By focusing intently upon profitable and bountiful energy production, especially through nuclear power, Wilensky argued that “what we are doing is handing our children and our children’s children a ticking time bomb.” She acknowledged that while the government and powerful corporations displayed arrogance, wistfulness, and at times, a complete separation from reality, “it is you and I who have not come to terms with our radioactive garbage.” She denounced overconsumption, and the assumption that “the earth is here to save us” and “her resources will

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<sup>117</sup> Unknown author as Mother Earth, “Children of the Earth.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1978, p. 37.

never run out.” The first step, according to Wilensky, would be introspective and personal: “a change in the way we view ourselves and the world around us.” The Earth was protesting through “clogged waterways, polluted oceans, smoggy air, contaminated reservoirs, [and] unexpected droughts and freezes,” demanding an abrupt confrontation with the need to maintain a livable place for humanity. The basis of this new relationship would be twofold—to conserve and simplify.<sup>118</sup>

Following the accident at Three Mile Island, more readers turned to *WomanSpirit* to spread awareness and urge action. In the letters section from spring 1980, Friends of the Planet wrote “Our thoughts are powerful, therefore, a common thought and vision held by thousands of people simultaneously can be immensely powerful. Our vision is for Global Peace and a Non-Nuclear Future.” They encouraged readers to participate in a collective psychic resistance on March 20, at 10 p.m. EST, in order to produce a wave of energy by focusing on their common vision at the same time.<sup>119</sup> In the same issue, Carolyn Projansky wrote from Women for Environmental Health, saying that women “know that the exploitation and domination of Mother Earth reflects and perpetuates the violent subjugation to which women ourselves are subjected.” Things were only becoming more dire, as she argued “We must end the nuclear threat before it becomes the ultimate violent act,” calling upon “women worldwide to resist, with our rage, our hearts and our actions, this final threat to our survival.”<sup>120</sup>

Chellis Glendinning, from San Francisco, contributed by creating a “ritual for despair” and explaining how after the Three Mile Island accident, her “sense of environmental despair, isolation, and frustration with American politics became overwhelming.” Her goal with the ritual

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<sup>118</sup> Wilensky, Laura. “Nuclear Power.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1978.

<sup>119</sup> Friends of the Planet. Letter. *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1980, p. 64.

<sup>120</sup> Projansky, Carolyn. “Announcements.” *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1980, p. 42.

was “to create a safe space to recognize, express, and release negative emotions about the state of the planet; to move beyond despair and immobility into hope, cohesion, and action.” She argued that in general, “American culture is in the denial stage about the deterioration of the environment.” Glendinning wanted to overcome her sense of despair, since she believed that “the less we act out of despair, the more likely we are to survive.”<sup>121</sup>

A group of lesbians and feminists from Santa Fe, Women for Survival, submitted their mission and contact information for *WomanSpirit* readers. Following Three Mile Island, more people in the lesbian feminist community felt that the situation was imminent. “We recognize nuclear power and nuclear weapons to be the greatest threat ever to survival of all life on this planet,” they wrote, and they aimed to direct their energy “toward stopping the nuclear industry in all its forms.” Environmentalism was always a key focus of *WomanSpirit*, but the perspective was typically limited to an ecological feminism which tended to ignore the realities of environmental racism and injustice. Women for Survival, however, acknowledged that as women in the Southwest, they “live side-by-side with both Chicano and Native American cultures who have lived longer on this land and closer to the land than the white culture,” and argued “the nuclear industry is hurting native cultures and people first and worst.” However, they also noted that their group consisted only of white women and insisted that “we want to work with women of all colors.” This essentially placed the burden of making contact onto women of color who were interested in anti-nuclear organizing, rather than Women for Survival taking the initiative to create community and build networks with the people they lived “side-by-side” with in Santa Fe. Though, they certainly could have done this at some point. If they did this kind of coalition-building work, it is not mentioned in this piece.

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<sup>121</sup> Glendinning, Chellis. “A Ritual for Despair.” *WomanSpirit*, Summer 1980, pp. 13-14.

While they hinted at environmental racism, without naming it as such, they were adamant that “the nuclear industry threatens the survival of all people everywhere.” There are certainly suggestions of a radical, inclusive, intersectional politics—a potential. They argued “if the nuclear industry is allowed to continue, there will be no future freedom for anybody... not one of us is free until all of us are free...” They insisted upon seeing nuclear power as “especially a women’s issue,” arguing that “radiation affects women and children first.” They called upon *WomanSpirit* audiences: “We must rise up as women and stop these male government officials and corporation financiers from destroying our life-support system, our Earth Mother.” Nuclear power, as they saw it, was “the deadliest manifestation of dominance as practiced by the white man’s Patriarchal civilization.” They equated “the rape of our Mother Earth” and “the rape of women by men.”

According to Women for Survival, challenging the nuclear industry could have much broader implications. Through anti-nuclear activism, they saw themselves as “challenging this whole value system of hierarchical power relationships whose power lies in domination, control, and fear; a system that places priority on destructive technological progress and the accumulation of power and profits at the expense of life; a system based on destruction and war.”<sup>122</sup>

The *WomanSpirit* collective also wrote about the accident. “We want to reclaim an understanding of life as we struggle to free ourselves from the death culture,” which was at work both at nuclear power plants and around Wolf Creek. At Rootworks, “Our minds are prodded by the landscape, spoiled for gold and lumber. The men have been here and left their mark. We want to heal and be healed.” As the world changed around them, in potentially permanent and harmful ways, they remained determined to stand and resist:

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<sup>122</sup> Women for Survival. “Women for Survival.” *WomanSpirit*, Summer 1980, p. 18.

“We sit in this mountain clearing determined that our Mother is not dead; we are not dead. We must reclaim her symbols, our symbols; her life, our life. We must resist the cancerous culture that threatens all life. We must not die singly and privately of this cancer, but alert the sleeping people of the planet that, as at Three Mile Island, we are in mortal danger. The new religion is the economic system. Their god is gold.”<sup>123</sup>

Three Mile Island was not the focus of all the work related to nuclear power submitted to *WomanSpirit*, though it certainly caught the attention of many readers. One contributor, Martha Courtot, wrote a poem called “Return to Eniwetok.” It begins with this quote attributed to an anonymous Native person: “THEY PROMISED US MANY THINGS BUT THEY NEVER KEPT BUT ONE: THEY SAID THEY WOULD TAKE OUR LAND, AND THEY TOOK IT.” Eniwetok, also spelled Eniwetak, is a circle of small islets surrounding a lagoon and coral reefs, which is a part of the Marshall Islands. The people who live in the Marshall Islands often identify themselves by their atoll of birth, residence, or both, though they are also called Marshallese. Japan maintained control over Eniwetok from 1914 until the United States captured it during World War II. After that, they further displaced the Eniwetok people by utilizing the atoll as an atomic bomb testing site. 67 nuclear and atmospheric bombs were exploded on the islands from 1946 to 1958, with the explosive yield being comparable to “1.6 Hiroshima bombs being detonated every day for 12 years.”<sup>124</sup> The contaminated topsoil was removed in 1980, which is likely why Courtot referenced a return to the land, but it was still too badly polluted for people to live there safely. The Eniwetokes and American veterans who were present for testing and decontamination experienced higher rates of cancer and health problems, and they sometimes passed on birth defects to their children as a result of radiation exposure.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> WomanSpirit Collective. “WomanSpirit.” *WomanSpirit*, Summer 1980, p. 48.

<sup>124</sup> Minority Rights Group International. “History.” *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples-Marshall Islands*, refworld, May 2018, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4954ce22c.html>

<sup>125</sup> Atomic Heritage Foundation. “Atomic Veterans: Enewetak Atoll.” *The National Museum of Nuclear Science and History*, June 17, 2019, <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/history/atomic-veterans-enevetak-atoll/>



“The smooth white talk of Americans,” wrote Courtot, “surrounds us/their eyes refuse to look at us... their metal voice promise us/wonderful houses and fruitful gardens/in some other country where the sky is clean/the clouds safe the earth not broken/instead we wait on the edge of the doomed land/for two generations our eyes always watching/where we have come from.” Concluding her poem, she wrote to a white audience, commanding them to “look carefully in the folds of our silent faces/you will find your own future waiting/you will remember us for a long time/the people whom god ordained to be here.”<sup>126</sup> Courtot’s work is an example of a *WomanSpirit* contributor engaging with the idea of Indigenous sovereignty, though it was never a dominant theme of the publication.

In a review of *Ain’t Nowhere We Can Run: A Handbook for Women on the Nuclear Mentality* by Susan Koen and Nina Swain, contributor Paula Hirshboeck from Cheyenne, Wyoming wrote about her experience in the Pentagon resistance group of July 11-18, 1980. “What is the purpose of our resistance work?” was a question both the organizers and onlookers were asking. During seven days at the “concrete death maze of the Pentagon,” they intended to channel their “women’s energy in resistance to the war—for the bombs are falling now, on the poor and unemployed, on all of us as actual or potential victims of nuclear madness.” A noble goal, yet they wondered: “Are we expecting to effect change? If not, what’s the point?” Indeed, argued Hirshboeck, it is easy to become trapped in a “need for results” in a society so focused on efficiency and productivity. Rather, the purpose of resistance for her involved stepping out of service to evil and inviting others to come along. “In the face of collective evil no one person can stop this self-perpetuating war machine,” she wrote, “We are all sisters and brothers caught in a sinful system.” Spiritual resistance meant choosing to “stand in contemplative witness to the

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<sup>126</sup> Courtot, Martha. “Return to Eniwetok.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1981, p. 32.

simple moral truth” that killing, and preparing to kill, is wrong, rather than dealing on the system’s terms.<sup>127</sup>

The *WomanSpirit* “Announcements” section was used by all kinds of women's organizations to communicate with the lesbian feminist community. One woman, Pat Farren, invited readers to contribute their answers for a book she was preparing based on the question: “What will it take to prevent nuclear war?” A group from Santa Cruz, California, Women Opposed to Nuclear Technology (W.O.N.T. - Diablo), wrote that they were committed to obstructing the Diablo Canyon power plant “until PG&E agrees never to operate Diablo as a nuclear facility,” and they needed help with feminist legal support, campaigning equipment, and funding. Wimmin of the Earth Bonding (W.E.B.) was also included, informing *WomanSpirit* audiences about their newsletter which aimed to provide an “international network for sharing diverse eco-feminist information vital to survival of wimmin and earth.”<sup>128</sup> In this way, lesbian feminists were able to use their press networks to organize politically when urgent and important issues arose.

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<sup>127</sup> Hirshboeck, Paula. “A Spirituality of Resistance.” *WomanSpirit*, Winter 1980, pp. 50-51.

<sup>128</sup> “Announcements.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1981, p. 36.



The Fall 1981 issue also included contact information to get involved at another upcoming Women's Demonstration at the Pentagon, which was to occur from November 15 to 16. "We are gathering at the Pentagon because we fear for our lives," reads the notice, "We fear for the life of this planet, our earth, and for the life of the children who are our human future."<sup>129</sup> About 2,000 women gathered at the Pentagon the year before, and they felt that their messages had gone unheeded, so they were back.<sup>130</sup> The Women's Pentagon Action protests of 1980 and 1981 were "exceptionally dramatic" and pageant-like demonstrations that were as theatrical as they were political. These acts of radical theater were inspired by their planning meetings and consciousness-raising, resulting in four stages of action based on "the ritual collective re-enactment of feelings of Mourning, Rage, Empowerment, and Defiance..." The performance and protest included drum beats, chanting, and huge papier-mâché puppets from Bread and Puppet Theater. Demonstrators also constructed a Women's Cemetery during the Mourning part of the performance.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> "Announcements." *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1981, p. 36.

<sup>130</sup> Valente, Judith. "Women's Group Protests at Pentagon." *The Washington Post*, Nov 17 1981, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1981/11/17/womens-group-protests-at-pentagon/0ac19eb2-dc6e-49bb-b13d-10cca8777acf/>

<sup>131</sup> Reed, T.V. *Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers: Literary Politics and the Poetics of American Social Movements*. Pp. 126-128.



Figure 10. "Amy Trompetter's puppets." Photographed by Diana Mara Henry, November 1980

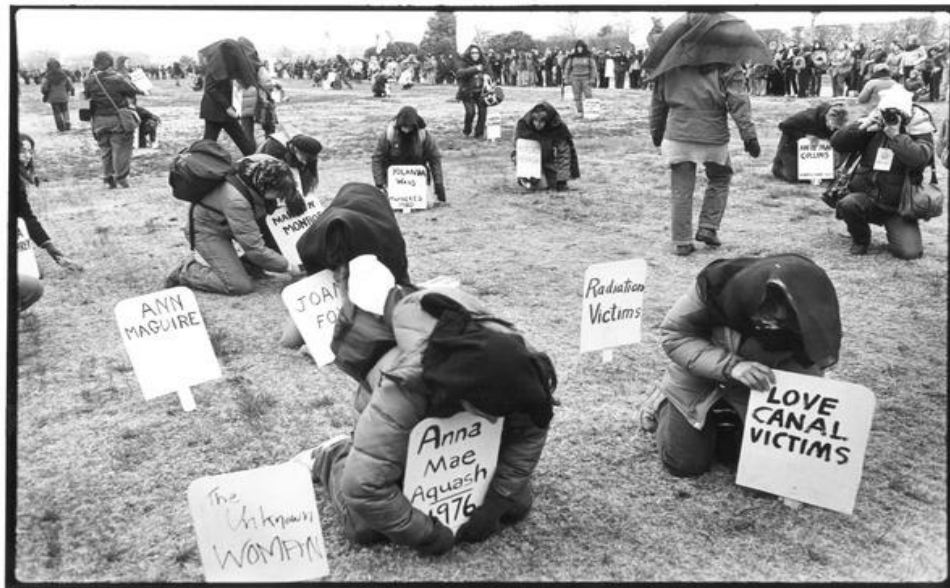


Figure 11. "Women's Pentagon Action, November 1980." Photographed by Diana Mara Henry



Figure 12. Cover of Peace Newsletter from December 1981, Syracuse Peace Council

The two demonstrations from 1980 and 1981 were closely connected, and the puppets were present for both. In 1981, about sixty-five protesters were arrested, three of which had smeared blood that they said was from a woman on the River Entrance to the Pentagon. The others were mostly arrested for blocking entrances. Though the focus was still on nuclear proliferation, the focus of the demonstration seemed to broaden over the course of President Ronald Reagan's first year in office—women said they were also protesting cuts to social services and the involvement of the United States in El Salvador, as well as women's and gay liberation.<sup>132</sup> Grace Paley published the "Women's Pentagon Action Unity Statement" in 1983, which denounced imperialism, nuclear bombs, the failure to ratify the ERA, anti-semitism, radiation on Native lands, uranium mining in South Africa, the often racist sterilization of

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<sup>132</sup> Valente, "Women's Group Protests at Pentagon."

women, the pathology of racism in general, and the connections “of gold and oil” between the imperialist Pentagon and multinational corporations.<sup>133</sup> The announcement in *WomanSpirit* was likely the catalyst for some women who went to protest in D.C. in 1981. People continued to utilize the magazine to communicate for political organizing until its end.

Some *WomanSpirit* contributors used the magazine to urge women not to pay taxes to reclaim their personal power. “Two related facts make tax resistance an obvious choice for feminists,” asserted Janey Meyerding from Seattle, “1) women have less money than men and 2) the process and products of the government are antithetical to the means and goals of feminism.” For her, the government was anti-feminist because it was dominated and controlled by men and based on patriarchal ideals. “Feminists’ concern for our right to control our own bodies is just one aspect of the wide feminist belief that each individual should be able to control her own life” she explained, elaborating: “not in the competitive, laissez-faire, capitalist male sense but in the cooperative, mutually supportive, and nurturing female sense.” She concluded by arguing that “Tax resistance is one way to say NO to those to oppress us, NO to those who oppress our sisters and brothers, and YES to our own feminist commitments.”<sup>134</sup>

Dot Fisher-Smith, from Wolf Creek, agreed with Meyerding. “The nuclear arms race is synonymous with the simple equation: taxes = death and thrives on our gullible acceptance of the old saw that they are both inevitable,” she began. “Death may be, but taxes aren’t, especially when we wake up to the horror that it is actually no other than we ourselves who are actually financing death, buying bombs with our tax dollars.” She suggested beginning with the refusal to pay one’s telephone tax, and vaguely suggested that income tax refusal was “not necessarily any

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<sup>133</sup> Paley, Grace. “Women’s Pentagon Action Unity Statement.” *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 49, No. 4, Winter 2008, pp. 461-464.

<sup>134</sup> Meyerding, Janey. “Reclaiming Our Personal Power.” *WomanSpirit*, Winter 1981, p. 57.

riskier than you are willing for it to be.” For Fisher-Smith, tax refusal was a form of nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience, as well as “a profound religious process of conscientious self-examination which strips us bare, exposes us, makes us vulnerable and ultimately sets us free.”<sup>135</sup>

Just as crisis environmentalists and others expressed concerns about overpopulation, some contributors to *WomanSpirit* shared these worries. While abortion and contraception are “well understood” in the Times of Wimmin, their use and necessity is rare. Baba Copper, from chapter two, explained how “The population levels which burdened the planetary body during the late patriarchal times fueled male mechanized visions with soldiers, workers, and consumers.” She even included both abortion and contraception as “necessary techniques to limit population” during the patriarchal past, along with war, pestilence, forced sterilization, and female infanticide. Through the intentional timing of pregnancy and the practice of parthenogenesis, women would be able to determine the sex of their fetus, and influence the levels of testosterone, if needed, through “mind/body techniques.” Parthenogenesis is a method of reproduction of a female gamete without fertilization. Parthenogenesis is most common among plants and invertebrate animals, but some lesbian separatists were deeply inspired by the potential that women could practice that ability as well. These practices would be to “feminize” the male, which Copper saw as a “long-standing cultural goal.”<sup>136</sup>

Ruth Mountaingrove reviewed thirteen science fiction and fantasy novels in one article, including Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* (1979), Joanna Russ’ *The Female Man* (1975), and Suzy McKee Charnas’ *Walk to the End of the World* (1974) and *Motherlines* (1978). She noted how these authors played with notions of time, as the journey of the hera—rather than

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<sup>135</sup> Fisher-Smith, Dot. “Death and Taxes.” *WomanSpirit*, Winter 1981, pp. 57-58.

<sup>136</sup> Copper, Baba. “Changing Our Image of the Future.” *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1980, pp. 6-9.



hero—often “embodies time travel, time warp, parameters of dimensional relating, or a matriarchy that is flourishing...” One definitive message that Ruth saw in many of these novels was “that there will be a holocaust. And out of this will come a different life for women.” “In these all women worlds,” explained Ruth, “either after the holocaust or some other catastrophe/arrangement where men are no longer present, we are shown that women can live without men.” The focus on parthenogenesis implies an investment in reproductive futurity that may be unique to lesbian feminists, as some queer theory focused on gay male queerness positions gays as opposed to the reproductive futurity of heterosexual life.<sup>137</sup> In this way, some of the contributors to *WomanSpirit* queered reproduction itself, and these authors imagined numerous approaches to the challenge of reproducing the women’s line without heterosexuality. These methods included the most favored parthenogenesis, along with ova exchange, genetic surgery, manipulation of uterine power, artificial insemination, artificial wombs, ritual beastiality with stallions, and cloning. “The problem of overpopulation has been solved in various ways,” wrote Ruth, explaining that the women in these novels were typically able to control their conception in one way or another.

“The prophecy is that women will survive the holocaust,” concluded Ruth, “And that mostly men will not.” “When they do,” she warned, “there will be even more exaggerated sexist, patriarchal modes of life.” However, women in spaces without men got along well and lived without war, sharing power and decisions with each other. Women would prioritize “relationships and... raising children who can survive in a women’s world,” again centering reproductive futurity. They would also live simply, because, as Ruth saw it, “Technology has just about killed us, so it’s no wonder why women see the future as more simplified, more closely

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<sup>137</sup> Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Duke University Press, 2004.

connected to the earth.” Most importantly, the heras of these novels was always the changer. “All these heras change their worlds,” wrote Ruth, “I could live in such a world.”<sup>138</sup>

Ruth was a frequent book reviewer, also discussing *The Politics of the Solar Age: Alternatives to Economics* (1981) by Hazel Henderson. The message of the book, according to Ruth, was “that the era of corporations and multinationals is coming to an end. They are now in their decline and no panaceas will work. Reagan’s administration is a terminal emergency. Anything which is done to bail out the old order will fail because that mode of being has reached its decadent stage.” Capitalist and patriarchal destruction of the environment was deeply concerning to Ruth, “as men continue to destroy complex systems and replace them with monoculture.” This reminded her “of the current practice here in the Pacific Northwest of killing everything but conifers via aerial spraying and planting seedlings in rows with no protection by other growth—not at all the way nature builds a forest! Then there are the rain forests of Brazil,” she lamented, “which supplied one quarter of the earth’s oxygen, now being destroyed to create cattle ranches.” From her perspective, “the core of the problem is greed,” and she insisted that the past centuries of industrialization only resulted in more wealth for the already rich, rather than improving the standard of life for all people. “It is up to us here in the ‘grass roots’ to provide the solutions and adaptations for a new society,” since they were already experimenting with solar power and other replacements for petroleum.<sup>139</sup>

One of *WomanSpirit*’s most prominent and frequent contributors was author, activist, and educator Sally Gearhart, who is most known for her queer activism alongside Harvey Milk, her status as the first open lesbian to receive a U.S. tenure-track faculty position,<sup>140</sup> and authoring

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<sup>138</sup> Mountaingrove, Ruth. “What If?” *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1980, pp. 9-11.

<sup>139</sup> Mountaingrove, Ruth. “Goodbye Dinosaurs.” *WomanSpirit*, Winter 1981, p. 56.

<sup>140</sup> Gearhart achieved this at San Francisco State University in 1973.

*The Wanderground* (1978). During the 1970s, she was also the co-chair of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, an organization founded during the previous decade which aimed to foster respect and coalition between the queer community and the church through education and criticism. In 1972, Gearhart delivered a radical and incendiary speech titled “The Lesbian and God-the-Father, or All the Church Needs is a Good Lay—On Its Side” during a pastors’ conference at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley.<sup>141</sup> In her controversial 1982 essay “The Future—If There Is One—Is Female,” Gearhart illustrated her vision of the future. She saw a solution to the threat of self-annihilation and the destruction of the planet in returning the affairs and responsibilities of humanity and the world to the hands of women. She put forward three requirements—“every culture must begin to affirm a female future,” “species responsibility must be returned to women in every culture,” and “the proportion of men must be reduced to and maintained at approximately 10% of the human race.”<sup>142</sup> Troublingly, the means to achieve that reduction were not specified.

### **THE END OF *WOMANSPIRIT***

By 1980, Jean was wondering if their “goal of connecting women in a loving circle of consciousness raising and support” had been accomplished. Had “women’s spirituality been fully accepted in the women’s movement?” Was it time to move on?<sup>143</sup> The Mountaingroves did begin another project, producing a lesbian feminist photography magazine called *The Blatant Image* annually from 1981 to 1983. When *WomanSpirit* concluded in 1984, however, it did not come to an end because they thought their work was done. Jean and Ruth were simply tired from a

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<sup>141</sup> Cherry, Kittredge. “Sally Miller Gearhart: Lesbian educator and activist who challenged the church.” <https://qspirit.net/sally-gearhart-lesbian-church/>

<sup>142</sup> Gearhart, Sally Miller. “The Future—If There Is One—Is Female” *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence*, New Society Publishers, 1982, pp. 266-284.

<sup>143</sup> Mountaingrove, Jean. “WomanSpirits.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1980, p. 28.

decade of producing an independent magazine in rustic intentional communities in the Oregon wilderness. They were also getting older, and rather than constantly facilitating connections in the women's community across state and country borders, they wanted to relax and enjoy their lives. They needed a break. Jean wanted to be able to dedicate more time to her garden. The focus on *WomanSpirit* and their other creative projects had also led to the consistent procrastination of numerous maintenance projects at Rootworks, including installing a water system, repairing roads, finishing a storage building, greenhouse, and the porch for the Moon House, and most importantly, rest. Their desire to connect with other women and their community had not disappeared, but they wanted *WomanSpirit's* conclusion to be natural, intentional, and graceful. The time was coming.<sup>144</sup>

In the winter of 1981, Ruth and Jean experimented with a period of "hibernation" to avoid exhausting themselves like they had the previous winter. During these two months, they requested that no visitors visit Rootworks.<sup>145</sup> The following year included a fall season of work, though it paid off in abundance in the garden. Carrots had managed to sprout from "the hard clay of Rootworks" and Jean noted how "many hours of composting" made the soil now light and fertile. They had canned their tomatoes and stored boxes of apples, winter squash, and potatoes. The circular garden was lush with "beets, carrots, Chinese cabbage, endive, cabbage, and kohlrabi." The following year, they would be able to use the greenhouse they finally had a roof for. Though Jean cultivated a great variety and amount of food at Rootworks, it was not quite enough for them to be self-sufficient, and she told readers how "*WomanSpirit* is feeling the economic situation just as you are."<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Grosjean, Shelley A. "“Making Ourselves Real”: Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove in the Southern Oregon Lesbian-Feminist Community, 1970-1984." Thesis, University of Oregon, June 2014, pp. 61-62.

<sup>145</sup> Mountaingrove, Jean. "Wintry *WomanSpirit*." *WomanSpirit*, Winter 1981, p. 62.

<sup>146</sup> Mountaingrove, Jean. "Woman Spirit News." *WomanSpirit*, Winter 1982, p. 39.

Because they intended to conclude the magazine gracefully, they were able to communicate the coming end to their readers ahead of time. They announced their decision in the summer issue from 1983. Jean wrote that “For the past several years we have questioned whether we could/should continue to produce her.” They determined that it would be best to let the magazine complete its tenth year, and that the final issue would be #40. Their reasons were complex, explained Jean, and noted that Ruth compared managing the publication to lifting a calf, saying “When it is born it is easy to carry. As it grows older and heavier, it is harder and harder to lift.” Ruth and Jean were growing older too: “Ruth is 60 and Jean almost 58, and *WomanSpirit* has grown so large that carrying her takes most of the strength we have.” They also felt that they needed time, space, and energy to grow and move in new directions. They viewed the end of the magazine with both “sadness and anticipation.” Jean wrote that while she would miss the community and reading submissions, she also looked

“forward to enjoying Rootworks without the stress of deadlines and scheduling; to having time in May in the garden and woods, and in November to sleep late; to not having a stack of letters to answer, mss to return, apologies to make; to finding out who I am and what I want to do when I am rested; to finding a new answer to ‘How are you?’ instead of my long-standing ‘Exhausted.’ I want to discover what paths my heart will lead me on when there is time to listen to her.”

Ruth would also miss reading texts and sharing ideas, along with taking pictures of the production process, which she did for every single issue. What she was looking forward to was

“not having the hard draining decisions and details and the last week of layout. Not having to get up when every muscle and nerve screams STAY IN BED. Each issue now leaves me very tired, and I just about get rested two weeks before the next issue begins. I’m looking forward to not working and not being exhausted on my birthday. And having time to work in my darkroom, to photograph, do construction, and to dream.

They were not ending their engagement with the lesbian feminist community, just reducing their once central role in it. In 1983, they wrote “Ruth and Jean will continue to be at Rootworks, so

you are welcome to visit us even after the magazine production ceases next year,” though they definitely appreciated a letter ahead of time, for notice.<sup>147</sup> By that fall, the garden had blossomed and their soil bore fruit—zucchini, green beans, and tomatoes. The compost bins were full, and they had received approval to build permanent spring boxes on their land, noticeably increasing their water supply. Their neighbors were a bit impolite—bees had nested below the porch of Natalie Barney and Ruth and Jean had six stings between them, and skunks liked to explore their kitchen. Still, the raccoons in the apple trees and the deer in the woods were more welcome than not.<sup>148</sup>

When it wasn't the magazine causing stress, it was something else for the Mountaingroves. 1984 began with the sheriff and the FBI looking for information about things they did not know, new neighbors getting lost, and dealing with the UPS driver and the repairman. One day, when Jean pulled over to let someone pass on the road, their truck got stuck in the soft shoulder and died. When heavy rains came, the creek washed over their road for a day. “It is always something...!”<sup>149</sup> Finally, production of the final issue had come. Jean awoke at 6 in the morning on May 18 to “the sounds of the trucks loading logs from the timber sale on the mountain above us... Between their beeping signals I hear a robin singing in the garden. Here we live in the middle of such contrasts—and grateful to have the robin at all!” The final message she left readers in *WomanSpirit* encouraged them to continue sending her information, specifically about “intuitions, visions, ideas...” and any rituals or psychic processes involved with menstruation. She also noted that she liked to exchange produce seeds with other women

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<sup>147</sup> Mountaingrove, Jean and Ruth. “WomanSpirit’s News: One More Round.” *WomanSpirit*, Summer 1983, p. 16-17.

<sup>148</sup> Mountaingrove, Jean. “WomanSpirit News.” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1983, p. 44.

<sup>149</sup> Mountaingrove, Jean. “News of WomanSpirit.” *WomanSpirit*, Spring 1984, p. 31.

and wrote that any seeds sent would be much appreciated. She had celery, swiss chard, calendula, and marigold seeds to trade.

“Some of us are more obtuse than others!” began Ruth’s farewell, “It took my most recent serious illness to make me realize that the ending of *WomanSpirit* is exactly what I need.” The energy drain she was feeling reminded her of the very first year of production. The women’s printer in Eugene printed the pages, but did not collate, quality control, staple, or trim, so they handled all of that plus distribution. They slept in random places, lived in different houses, worked with whoever would give them time—“Each time I went through this I felt I had given up a year of my life,” wrote Ruth. For her future projects, Ruth envisioned the creation of women’s music, which she thought women had just started to work on, along with her fantasy of a small feminist photography school.<sup>150</sup>

Recalling the beginning, the Mountaingroves remembered how “In 1974 we had only our trust in the value of womanexperience as our theory... It is now not theory but facts.” They did not seek contributions from the well-known:

“We wanted the genuine, the original, and the heartfelt... We wanted diversity: several views of a subject. Not pro vs. con, not dualism but inclusiveness. We wanted to stay tuned to the cycle of changes in nature and to foster and honor our love for our mother earth. We wanted to create a womanspace for womanexperience. Not violence and hatred. Anger, YES. Rage, even, but hope, action, and support for moving through the anger. Not sexuality, but love and sisterhood: love of women, love of children, the living creatures and plants who share this earth with us. Always we tried to select what would help us think and feel and act clearly—what would empower us.”

They believed they succeeded in these aims. “Not for everyone, of course, but for many.” They cultivated a body of experience within ten volumes “for women to draw ideas and strength from long into the future.” They also asked forgiveness for their various errors, unfair decisions,

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<sup>150</sup> Mountaingrove, Ruth and Jean. “From *WomanSpirit*.” *WomanSpirit*, Summer 1984, p. 63.

occasional abruptness and rigidity, typos, misquotes, mistakes in credits, “or whatever else we have done or not done that is not sisterly.” Still connected to the “web of womanspirits,” they again welcomed readers to visit them at Rootworks, to share in the work and the fun. The inside of the back cover left readers with the final word: “WomanSpirit lives in the lives of all women.”<sup>151</sup>

A few months after the final issue of *WomanSpirit* was published, Ruth and Jean moved into separate spaces at Rootworks, beginning the “very tiring business” of sorting through their belongings. Jean had found a new love interest, and Ruth did not take it well. She had thought they would grow old together. In her anger at feeling abandoned, she smashed the windows in the barn and crashed her car into their truck. After this tirade, she felt a deep sense of shame in having let her impulsive, angry, and desperate self take over. Though the Mountaingroves attempted to live as friends and land partners for about a year, Ruth shortly moved off the land. During their time together, they dared to try to build new lives for themselves, reimagining the connections between intimacy, sexuality, and partnership. They explored what it meant to commit to a politics and a person at once.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Mountaingrove, Ruth and Jean. “Farewell from WomanSpirit: The Last Word...” Summer 1984, p. 64.

<sup>152</sup> Grosjean, “Making Ourselves Real,” p. 135-136.



## CONCLUSION

“While our world reels to ruin,  
So every day we are told, even every hour,  
In this quiet place I watch the sky at dusk  
And observe no scar of its violations.  
It looks as when the child I was  
Watched... watched...  
The changes from light to dark,  
From moon to waning moon and round again,  
A quiver in the diaphragm like the turmoil,  
The awe of first love.

The jets tearing our earth’s swaddling envelope,  
The missiles’ terrifying orgasms in space,  
Have not yet altered the light of dawn  
Or dislocated the patterns of the stars.  
Man’s ugly and enormous hubris  
Is perhaps puny after all:  
That he be punished by it with annihilation  
Of no more final import  
Then the sinking into primordial mud [sic]  
Of the ponderous pinheaded dinosaurs  
Or perishing of the hornlocked great elk.  
What difference between overgrown body  
Or topheavy horny armament  
And overgrown cleverness? Blind technology?

And yet...  
To die and not know  
Is different from dying and knowing.  
That the human pattern grown from the play of the Universe  
By whatever chance or plan, may be obliterated

Is a foreknowledge that alters our way with one another  
And with all life;  
Alters the mood of our inwardness.  
With that insight we know a new meaning of love,  
Love for our kind even its criminality  
And love for all sister forms of life:  
Feline and serpent, condor, moth—  
Of forest and rock, water, sky  
(These also us and we them).  
Yes: to die and not know  
Is different from dying and knowing,  
A unique anguish we humans share.

Our grandparents said proudly: Noblesse oblige.  
Shall we say: To be aware obliges?—  
That the floodgates of love may fling wide  
And the laughter, the dance of love prevail?”

-Elsa Gidlow, 1980, Age 81  
Mill Valley, California<sup>153</sup>

Ruth Mountaingrove’s ashes rest in the earth of Rootworks, embedded in the land she lived on for years, covered by two lilac trees. The clearing, between the vegetable garden and fruit orchard, was intentionally placed near a small creek, which has now become a ravine. A new caretaker of Rootworks, Laura, insists that consistent, patriarchal, and violent mining in the area has contributed to the erosion, which threatens to pull away the trees, the soil, and Ruth’s ashes away forever.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Gidlow, Elsa. “Letter from a High Place.” *WomanSpirit*, Summer 1980, p. 15.

<sup>154</sup> Root, Raechel Herron. “Herstory if Caught by the Camera’s Eye’: Photographers of Oregon’s Lesbian Lands.” Thesis, University of Oregon, June 2020, P. 61

Ruth passed away at the end of 2016, and Jean passed away at the end of 2019—both in December. During their time together, they experimented with combining the personal and the political. I did not seek the intimate details or the behind-the-scenes truths of their relationship. They knew what they published in *WomanSpirit* would be widely read, and while they were vulnerable, they selectively shared their experiences with that in mind. Rather, I centered on Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove as leading figures within the lesbian land movement, and as the founders of such an important magazine. I was able to cruise over ten years of their work, and the work of so many others, and garner just a glimpse of what lesbian feminist futurity was like—an idea of how the no-longer-conscious could be called upon in order to create a better world that is not-yet-here.

Publications like *WomanSpirit* read like an early form of slow, grassroots social media—overflowing with different people’s thoughts, opinions, and discourses. People often replied to each other’s work or criticized decisions of the collective. They sent in letters, artwork, poems, essays, manifestos, and more, leaving behind a potent and fascinating lesbian feminist culture to examine. Dissatisfied with living life under patriarchy and heteronormativity, some lesbian feminists took it upon themselves to create their own world, a new culture, and a better future. Their queer futurity is unique and diverse—many women held onto the power of reproductive futurity and motherhood, connected their bodies to the earth, and attempted to separate from men and maleness entirely. They resisted straight time and the heteronormative, patriarchal present.

Over the course of the Cold War, nuclear anxiety and tension increased across the country and separatist lesbians, who already viewed the earth and their bodies as intrinsically linked, could not look away from accidents like Three Mile Island and other environmental

crises. They used their networks and *WomanSpirit* in order to organize political demonstrations and resistance against nuclear power and other threats to their future.

The radicalism of the lesbian land movement and *WomanSpirit* must be considered alongside the issues of race, class, and gender. While marginalized lesbians were able to participate in alternative press networks, there are many submissions which reference an inherent, essential experience that all women were supposedly bonded by. Clearly, not all women have the same ideas about gender and oppression, and lesbians are not monolithic—everyone’s perspective has been shaped by numerous facets of their identity and experiences. Analyzing and engaging with flawed queer radicalism in history is of vital importance to queer resistance today. Cisgender white queer people, and even genderqueer white people, occupy a crucial space in the fight for liberation—will we focus on our own issues above all else or will we recognize the unique and imminent dangers faced by transgender and genderqueer people of color in our communities? When we have the ability and resources to try to escape the reach of oppressive systems and laws, will we stop and consider the lives of people who do not have that option? Will we prioritize assimilation and inclusion into an oppressive order by expressing an “acceptable” mode of queerness or declare solidarity with those who need it most?

The world did not end, and there was no nuclear holocaust. Still, the fear is worth examination—how does a person act and react if they are convinced the end of the world is inevitably approaching? Over the course of reading *WomanSpirit* I noticed some of my thoughts and fears, and the worries of people I know, reflected in the typewritten pages. Many of the political problems of the United States today can be traced easily back to when lesbian lands flourished. Today it is not nuclear proliferation that people protest, but climate change, and the painfully slow and gradual action of governments and corporations. On the west coast, every

summer, the sky turns orange and air becomes smoke. The ocean pummels and wrecks communities with torrential rains and destructive waves in the south. Most of the worst environmental damage to come will impact the least responsible people in the world, who also often have less resources to recover. Some people I know are apprehensive about having children because they don't know what the world will be like in a few decades.

Elsa Gidlow is a poet and philosopher who contributed frequently to *WomanSpirit*. Her poem, above, expresses the overall guiding philosophy of this thesis—to be aware of humanity's inevitable doom is to be obliged to live authentically, love radically, and build community while we still can. The world is scary, and we will not be around forever. But humans are also incredibly resistant, and there have been many moments in history when it seemed that the end was nigh. We are still here. We are still here because people had the courage to let love prevail and create a better world. We must not become frozen in fear and doom but continue the centuries-long work of creating a brighter future for all.



Figure 13. Elsa Gidlow with Jean Mountaingrove at the Druid Heights garden, near Muir Woods