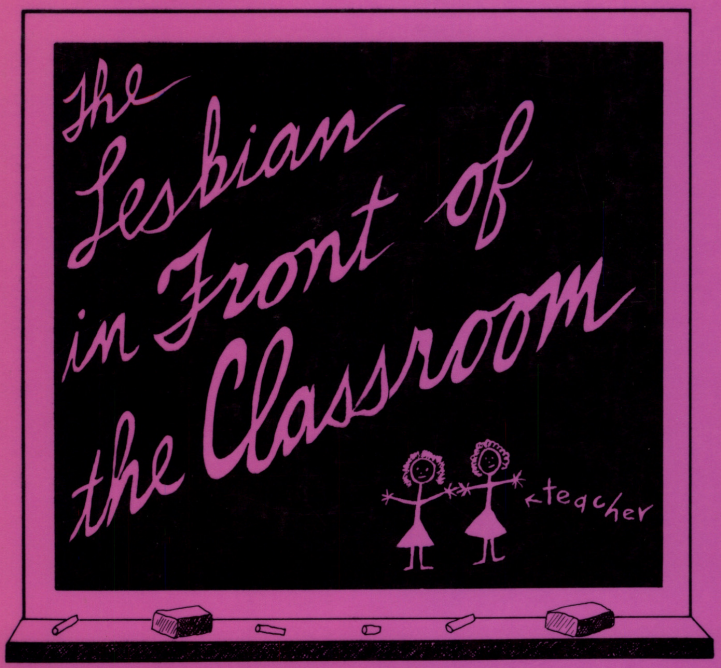

Writings by Lesbian Teachers

Caroline Sidaway
Ellen Louise Hart
M. Eugenia Rosa
Sarah-Hope Parmeter
Anza Stein

The Lesbian in Front of the Classroom: Writings by Lesbian Teachers

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Caroline Sidaway
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edited by

Sarah-Hope Parmeter and Irene Reti

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Contents

This book grew out of strong passions. One of us is a lesbian teacher, the other worked for the University of California as a writing tutor for years. We love many lesbians who are teachers; most of them teach in primary and secondary schools. Homophobia constricts their lives and undermines their teaching, and deprives their students of the education they could have if their teachers could bring their whole selves to the classroom. This is what it means to keep teachers' identities secret:

A friend from graduate school decides to put the word lesbian in the title of her doctoral dissertation, knowing that this may well destroy her chances of finding a job in academia once she's finished her PhD.

Another friend cannot be seen at lesbian and gay pride marches. One year, one of us carries a sign "my friend is a lesbian teacher." The next year our friend rides on the back of her lover's motorcycle wearing a helmet with a darkened visor.

Another friend, a fine writer, feels she can't contribute to this book—her situation might be too recognizable.

Women who are courageous in other areas of their lives become cautious in the classroom. Those of us not teaching at the university level are particularly vulnerable. Fifteen miles down the highway from us, in a district where many of our friends teach, a group of conservative parents led a harassment campaign last year against teachers who failed to begin every class day with the pledge of allegiance. What would these parents do to our friends if they knew they were gay?

These essays and poems describe different aspects of the lives and experiences of lesbian teachers. Clearly it is somewhat easier to be out at the university than at the primary or secondary level, although both university teachers who write here hold tenuous positions, and their relative freedom might not exist at other universities. Also notable is the contrast between Caroline Sidaway's essay "Miss Is A Lesbian" which is from England and the other essays in the book which are all from the United States. Sidaway speaks of wanting to "engage all the students in the becoming aware of, and examining the

conditioning process which damages all of us, which conditions us towards accepting heterosexualtiy as 'the real world'." Of course Sidaway experiences a huge gap between what she would like to teach and the everyday reality of the boys' school she teaches in despite its radical curriculum.

The scope of this book is broad, discussing everything from the relationships lesbian teachers have with parents and other teachers, legal rights, literacy, to teaching a writing class specifically for lesbian and gay students. A comprehensive, international anthology of the words of lesbian teachers still lies in the future. This book is our attempt to bring the words of friends, of women we love to the world, our attempt to show the passion they bring to their work, the contributions they make to education, their battles, the oppression they face because of who they are, the gifts they bring all of us because of who they are.

Irene Reti
Sarah-Hope Parmeter

M. Eugenia Rosa

Day Dream Gay Pride Parade 1987

"look mommy, there's
my teacher"
both of us glowing with pride,
while the smile
of recognition
turns green on mommy's face

What's A Lesbian Teacher To Do?

Anza Stein

In the middle of a book publishing project, thirty 12 year olds are binding pages, drawing illustrations, and glueing fabric to cardboard. I buzz around the classroom to offer suggestions, collect stray needles, and "shhh" down the irritatingly loud noise level. One straggler, still in the midst of rewriting her story, yells from across the room, "Hey Ms. Stein, what do you call a girl homosexual?" The room is suddenly silent. Taking a deep breath, I try to respond naturally. "The word is lesbian." She persists, asking how to spell it. Lesbian is spelled LESBIAN ." I say evenly, attempting not to blush or avoid eye contact.

The Principal of my school devotes a faculty meeting to improving staff communication. In one activity designed to promote self-esteem, I receive the following anonymous comments: "You are a very dedicated teacher, but you ought to cut loose a little more often." "Lighten up a bit. You are much too serious." "Try to have more fun here." I am perceived as the faculty grind.

60% of those surveyed in a recent Gallup Poll objected less to gay soldiers, salespeople, priests, and doctors than to gay educators.[1]

I am a Jewish lesbian teacher. I teach 6th and 7th grade at a primarily Hispanic school in California. After three years of teaching, I have become accustomed to the rigors of the job: long hours, endless paperwork, and the continual responsibility of working daily with 120 lively, unpredictable and curious adolescents. I adore teaching—helping students become equipped to explore the world, encouraging them to grow, and fostering mutual respect and trust. I feel so lucky to have a job which challenges me to be creative. Often times at home, when taking a shower or doing the dishes, an idea on how to implement a lesson pops into my head, and I am able to follow through and see results the very next day.

But I know I won't teach forever. As satisfying as teaching is, I will not choose to always remain closeted. Right now I lead a double life. There is my time spent at school, and then there is the rest of my life which revolves around lesbian identity. As I shift gears on my commute every morning, I am no longer even conscious of the ritual of leaving a part of my self behind. I put aside thinking about my lover, lesbian fiction that I am reading or events that I am organizing. It is scary to have become so accustomed to silencing a major part of myself. I want to do work where my passion for lesbian culture and politics is considered an asset. Writing this essay is the first time I have ever been able to integrate or combine the two loves of my life. In my limited free time, I've been able to plow through research, rough drafts and revision with unexpected energy.

In its institutionalized form, homophobia is as much a part of my daily routine at school as roll call. Schools today have absorbed the primary responsibility for developing both the minds and morals of young people. Thus the institution of education is subject to the antagonistic scrutiny of those who mourn the disappearance of "traditional values." All teachers are perceived as role models; gay and lesbian teachers face particular pressure.

Defined solely in terms of our sexuality, we are supposedly obsessed with sexual gratification. Child abuse and molestation is attributed to gays and lesbians. There is a fear that gay people possess the means to convert and teach innocent children to follow in our footsteps. During his 1978 campaign to rid the California public schools of any gay/lesbian presence,

State Senator John Briggs of Orange County said, "God said to go forth and bear children. That's what heterosexual people do. I have never known a homosexual family to have children. The only way they can increase their flock is to take from ours."[2]

Gay people are used as a scapegoat for social problems. Most reported incidents of child molestation involve men that the survivor knows—often fathers, step-fathers, uncles and family friends. Even the President of the American Psychiatric Association stated, "Some have feared that homosexual teachers might affect the sexual orientation of their students. There is no evidence to support this thesis." A majority of gays and lesbians were brought up in non-gay households, and as young people were continually subject to anti-gay sentiments and ideology.

Yet these lies and fears continually oppress lesbian teachers. I have tried to imagine what might happen if my name were attached to this article, and consequently a copy found its way into a school parent's hands. Could I lose my job? What else might happen? If it were legally possible to fire us, wouldn't they have done so already? With these questions in mind, I began a twofold search: for instances of discrimination against gay/lesbian teachers, as well as documentation of legal protection.

In *Lesbians, Gay Men, and Employment Discrimination: An Annotated Bibliography of Cases and Law Review Articles* published by the Lesbian Rights Project, I discovered that most of the cases that actually reached the judicial system involved male teachers fired for committing "immoral," public homosexual acts. The US Supreme Court has exercised judicial restraint, allowing state courts to maintain jurisdiction. For example, in "Sarac v. State Board of Education," Sarac challenged the constitutionality of the Education Code which required him to be dismissed for "immorality" after he was convicted of engaging in homosexual sex on a public beach. The court held that homosexuality was abhorrent and therefore clearly immoral; and that it certainly constituted evidence of unfitness to teach, and thus that Sarac had not been denied any constitutional rights." [3]

This case brings up several relevant issues. First of all, the Sarac v. Board of Education decision made reference to

immorality. In the current California Government Education Code, "Immoral or unprofessional conduct" is listed as just cause for dismissal.[4] An article in *McCalls* magazine entitled, "Should Homsexuals Be Allowed To Teach?" observed, "In virtually every instance of a school board's or a court's decision to bar homosexuals from teaching, the punitive action has been rationalized by the vague charge of 'immorality.'"[5] The real issue here is how morality is defined, and by whom.

This case and many others involved the limited circumstances of public sex. What most of us are far more concerned with is how open we can be about our self-expression. Can I read lesbian fiction during my lunch hour at work? Could I safely march in a gay pride parade? Again, what are the boundaries inscribed by a particular morality?

Answers to these questions are difficult to find. Even my Union office could not cite what code protects gay/lesbian teachers from discrimination. Provisions of the Fair Employment Practice Act which prohibit discrimination on grounds of race, religious creed, color, national origin, ancestry, physical disability, medical condition, marital status, or sex do not encompass discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Apparently, in 1979, one year after the Briggs initiative was defeated, former Governor Jerry Brown signed Executive Order B-54-79, which gave state employees protection from job discrimination based solely on sexual preference.[6]

Technically, gay/lesbian teachers do have legal protection from discrimination. It is more the psychological and emotional harassment which causes uncloseted teachers to leave the profession than pending law cases. A gay teacher in an article entitled "On Being a Gay Teacher: My Problems—and Yours" states,

> And yet, if I did come out, I would probably be far worse off. True, I would not be fired, but several teachers and staff would do all they could to get me out of the school. They would provoke the administration, the community, even the children. My principal would want to avoid publicity. He would get me a desk job at the district office or the Central Board of Education—anywhere as long as I was away from children.[7]

In spite of this, my background and personal values are an asset in the classroom. There are many reasons why I became a teacher. I grew up in a family where both education and justice were highly valued; these are part of our Jewish legacy. Both my mother and sister are teachers. My father is a lawyer. I remember the weekly trip to the library with my parents—a stack of books to be checked out while another stack was returned. In school, I started organizing and bossing other kids around. I had no doubt in my mind that someday I would have my own classroom. But I also grew up with a sense of otherness and alienation as a Jew. Although we lived in a Jewish part of Los Angeles, early on I had a sense of anti-semitism. I knew that my parents had actively chosen for us to live among Jewish people. As a teacher, I see my classroom curriculum, as well as daily interactions, as a means for creating justice, as well as acknowledging and appreciating human diversity.

Thus, I use how my students relate in our classroom as a model for increasing their understanding of the world. I am always passing out self-esteem and confidence building assignments. "Ms. Stein," I have been asked, "Why do we always have to write about ourselves?" Through group projects, debates, and lots of processing of information, my students have to think, question, and evaluate. This is what I consider to be my primary role as an educator—to build a community of curious, confident learners.

In my classroom, the students know that difference is good. During countless lunch periods, kids have come into the room, first to play games at the chalkboard and later to fess up,"Ms. Stein, can I talk to you. I have a problem." I have been able to clue into the feelings of shy and ostracized students. These students allow me to empathize; they must sense that I think "being different" is okay. Moreover, for many of my female students, I represent the possibility of being strong and independent. On more than one occasion a student has confided, "Ms. Stein, I don't want to ever get married."

In these ways, my lesbianism is indirectly a valuable asset. Yet I feel a constant tension when handling gay incidents at work. When I speak up, it is with tremendous trepidation. When I am silent, I berate myself for lacking nerve. On the day that my students were bookbinding, the straggler who was still rewriting her story had previously shown me a rough draft. Her usage of "girl homosexual" was both syntactically

incorrect, as well as homophobic in context—a character in the story was being punished by having to live with a lesbian. On my student's rough draft I didn't make any comments about these two errors, for fear of the discussion which might ensue. If I had chosen to use my trusty red marker to insert the question, "Why would it be such a terrible thing to live with a lesbian?," I would have left myself wide open to possible speculation and antagonism. I also sensed that my young author, in the throes of making decisions about boys, clothes, and her own body, would be threatened by such a comment. And I would be unable to pursue an appropriate discussion on sexuality.

In three years, I have only openly countered homophobia once. One day the most unpopular boy in one of my classes raised his hand to declare emphatically that having to work in cooperative groups was "gay" because you have to touch guys. I asked him to clarify his statement because I knew that the rest of the class would be on my side. Even so, I felt my voice waver as I told the class that there was nothing wrong with people of the same sex touching.

A few years ago, when I was teaching at the high school level, I saw one of my students standing outside the door at a gay/lesbian event. I tried to avoid looking in his direction the entire evening. He came up to me at a break during school the next day and asked enthusiastically if I had enjoyed the dance. Flustered, I conveyed to him as quickly and as quietly as possible that school was not the place for this type of conversation. I never felt able to approach him for a follow-up discussion, for fear of having to implicate myself.

When it comes to speaking up for lesbian or gay students, I become immobilized. In a resource book entitled *Homophobia and Education—How to Deal with Namecalling*, published by The Council on Interracial Books for Children, an educator comments, "Because homosexuality is such a charged issue, teachers rarely confront children who use homophobic name-calling to humiliate and infuriate other children. Many teachers do not realize that this sort of name-calling can be dealt with in much the same way as other kinds of bigotry and stereotyping."[8] It *cannot* be handled the same way, since opposing Homophobia is not given the same credence or lipservice as confronting other forms of prejudice. Most of my

students believe that to hate someone of a different color is wrong. They have personally experienced racism. Yet, for the most part, they feel that it is fine to hate gays and lesbians. A majority of high school students, after completing coursework on all types of oppression, still believed that it would be morally defensible to quarantine all gays and lesbians on some deserted island.[9] So if I were to stand up as an ally for gay people, that very act would be subject to scrutiny. As a "real" lesbian, I would only be pretending to be an ally. Since I lack the requisite cover, the risk is too great.

I am caught in a vicious circle. Here I am, a happy, healthy and competent person, who also happens to be a lesbian, and I cannot present to my students a real example of who lesbians are. Since they don't realize that they know healthy lesbians, because many of us are forced to be closeted, they grow up thinking that they've never known any of us. Gay and lesbian students are missing out on some vital support. In the classroom, I could be an effective gay ally if I were straight.

Having to silence a central part of my identity also affects how I approach teaching in general. In front of my students, I do not feel I am completely authentic because I am always on guard. A few years ago I came half asleep to school on a Monday morning. A boy came up and said, "I saw you at the beach this weekend. Were you with a girl or a boy?" I said that I was there with a woman. At 7:45 in the morning I get told, "Well, she sure did look like a dyke to me." I think to myself—yes—my girlfriend does look like a dyke—but I don't dare respond to his observation or challenge *his* usage of the term "dyke."

My intention is not to become "friends" with my students. I don't respect one of my colleagues who spends a lot of class time talking about herself. However, one of my most basic premises about education is that a teacher should work to make the learning relevant to a student's life. Yet I have to censor relevant aspects of my life. In Social Studies, when we talk about "freedom" and "justice," I expect my students to draw on situations and challenges from their own lives; I cannot set an example. When we work on writing essays that combine analysis with experience, I cannot share the writing I am most engaged with as a model. What I belive in pedagogically, I am unable to practice.

My relationship with students is based on developing mutual trust. As I cajole and implore them to take risks, I rely on our good rapport to insure their best effort. Likewise, when submitting work, students are often exposing themselves to possible criticism. Most students trust me enough to take risks and try their very best. However, I don't enter into this relationship based on trust with complete integrity. While I do not consciously lie about my life, my interactions in the classroom do not feel as authentic as I would like them to be. Good teaching involves inspiring kids to ask lots of questions and to explore ideas in depth. However, I often cut discussions short, for fear of revealing my sexuality. When a student from the local university did a guest lecture on Judaism in my classroom, he asked if any of my students knew someone Jewish. They thought they didn't know any Jews; not one student of mine had ever heard me mention my religious background. Since religion is a major topic of study in my Social Studies classes, we all were caught off guard by my belated disclosure. In general, I have taken a private stance when it comes to "personal" issues, even when certain facts would enhance my academic program.

I exist with this daily fear of being found out. As a result, my relationships with parents and other teachers are also strained. I have tenure, a supposed guarantee of job security. And yet, almost always, when I get a pink slip in my box to call a parent, the first thought that pops into my head is that somehow someone has realized that I'm a lesbian. One day, a fellow teacher approached me to say she had connections in the teacher's union—should I need help. I immediately assumed that she had figured me out. However, she then added that if I wanted time off for the Jewish holidays that she had some advice. I am always preoccupied with being closeted. This consumes a lot of my energy that could be used elsewhere. I feel detached at school, because internally I am rehearsing what to say in case a student asks an "incriminating" question. In an essay entitled "Lesbian as Teacher, Teacher as Lesbian," Meryl Friedman observes,

> After the usual liberal arts and "methods" courses, there I stood facing a class of eighth-graders unable to take refuge behind the academic and research frameworks that I'd

> always depended on for new and unnerving situations. Do these kids know I am a lesbian? Should they know? Should I tell them, or lie, or pretend I'm not gay, be invisible? For many lesbian teachers the lack of any support structure often leads to very real feelings of confusion, fear, and isolation. What is a lesbian teacher to do? [10]

My lesbian friends are surprised that I have made no real buddies at work; they consider me gregarious. I think I am the only lesbian on my staff, and have not figured out a "cool" way to make contact with the one other possibility. I imagine that a few of my colleagues would accept my lesbianism, but in a large group of teachers, I could never be out. A librarian from Michigan, interviewed in *From Closet to Classroom....A Perspective on Gay and Lesbian Individuals in U.S. Schools,* shares how she copes, "One survival mechanism is leaving the room when homophobic comments are being made. Another is to have at least one friend on the staff I can be out to...the difference between 0 and 1 is enormous."[11] In the faculty room, the other teachers chat easily about their spouses, homes and future plans. A majority of the faculty socializes off campus, with spouses included, at places I wouldn't feel comfortable. I spend most of my time in my own classroom. Another teacher interviewed in the *From Closet to Classroom....*publication shares a similar sentiment,

> It affects me most by making me more select at times than I would like to be. But I stop at a certain point. In terms of my relationship with my colleagues, it has a tremendous effect since the time I share with them is useless as a time for revitalizing me...[12]

I choose to spend a lot of time with my students outside of class. I enjoy gossiping with them, working one on one, or fixing up the room together. This rapport spills back into class time, and helps me to be a more effective teacher. But I know that both my students and I could benefit from my spending more time with other teachers. My teaching experience is limited to my nine hour a day encounters with 12 year olds. Obviously, the kind of feedback they can give me is different from what a colleague might be able to offer. I have one friend who teaches

at another school. We meet weekly to discuss discipline problems, reading selections and possible teaching units. When I tend to assume that just because a lesson flopped it must be my fault, this friend offers reassurance. I often say to my lover, "What would I do without Anna?" But at my site, I have no real allies. Thus, it has been heartwarming to read about the experiences of other gay/lesbian teachers. In his wonderful book entitled *Socrates, Plato and Guys Like Me, Confessions of a Gay Schoolteacher*, Eric Rofes writes, "Having no one at school with whom to talk about the compromises and deception was the most difficult part of the experience."[13] In the middle of an incredibly successful teaching career, Mr. Rofes left the classroom to become Executive Director of the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Community Service Center. I was saddened, but not surprised to hear of his career change.

Since beginning work on this essay, I ended up coming out to my first co-worker. Indeed, the "difference between 0 and 1 is enormous." It was wonderful to know that she was in the room when a colleague made his wrist limp and lisped, "Oh, I am not that way."I have been finding that there are ways to come out and seek support without having every student and parent know that I am "queer." I have used writing this essay as a means to open discussion with other gay/lesbian teachers in my district. Still, I ache to go further. I wish my real name could be attached to this document. As I apply for graduate school, I want to be able to continue this research, but hesitate in putting lesbian related work on my resume.

It stirs my imagination to picture myself as being a "complete" person at work. I want for children to grow up feeling proud to be gay—to feel like whole people. I want all my students to be able to see that there is more than one way to love. No I am not going to "brainwash" kids but I am sick and tired of bending over backwards to socialize them according to someone else's agenda. And so hooray if I do indeed serve as a lesbian role model. I want the institution of education to truly support those of us with special needs. I want for my student, Bob, whom I know to have gay parents, to be able to complete the assignment "How My Parents are Different" rather than failing the class. I want to be able to go to the school library, with a young lesbian and find "lesbian" in the card catalogue, as well as young adult fiction that will address her questions

and dreams.[14] I want to be able to openly make the connection between my love for women, my power as a feminist, and my commitment to students in the classroom. These are my dreams. Until the day that they are realized, all of us will suffer, and education will continue to lose many valuable teachers.

I've said as much as I might safely say about myself. Thanks to Susanna, Ellen, and Ellee, as well as my editors for tremendous help and support.

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[1] This statistic was gathered during a Gallup Poll Survey on "Attitudes Towards Homosexuals" published in the *San Jose Mercury News*, March 28, 1987.

2 Proposition 6, also known as The Briggs Initiative, was defeated by 60% of California voters in 1978. If the measure had passed, school boards would have been required to fire any teacher, school administrator or counselor found "guilty" of either "public homosexual activity" or "public homosexual conduct." "Activity" was defined as oral or anal intercourse between members of the same sex that is not "discreet" or is "likely to come to the same attention of schoolchildren or other school employees." However, "public homosexual conduct" was applied to all teachers, and was defined as "advocating, soliciting, imposing, encouraging or promoting private or public homosexual activity." An excellent analysis of the Briggs Initiative can be found in "Proposition 6 and The Rights of Us All," in *The Nation* October 21, 1978.

[3] Sarac v. Board of Education can be found in its complete form in *California Reporter* 69 (1967) The excerpt cited is found in *Lesbians, Gay Men, and Employment Discrimination: An Annotated Bibliography of Cases and Law review articles.* p.1 published by The Lesbian Rights Project. For over 10 years, this organization has been challenging the legal system and courts in order to further the rights of lesbians and gay men. For information about legal services or other publications on topics such as child custody and donor insemination

[4] California Government Code 12940. See Footnote 8.5 on sexual orientation.

[5] "Should Homosexuals Be Allowed to Teach?", Grace and Fred Hechlinger published in *McCalls*, March 1978, p. 162. This claim was part of a report based on interviews with 1,300 school officials.

[6] Executive Order B-54-79 was signed by Edmund G. Brown Jr. on April 4, 1979. This Order states in part, "The agencies, departments, boards and commissions...shall not discriminate in state employment against any individual based solely upon the individual's sexual preference." This information was provided by the Lesbian/Gay Community Liason to the San Francisco Human Rights Commission.

[7] "On Being a Gay Teacher:My Problems...And Yours" by Michael Trent. *Psychology Today*. April 1978, p. 136.

[8] "What Do We Say When We Hear 'Faggot,' " Leonore Gordon, *Homophobia and Education* , p.22, Bulletin of the Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1983. This is the best resource I know on the topic of homophobia and education. It includes terminology, reviews of young adult fiction, and lesson plans on countering homophobia. Single copies of this outstanding resource are available for $3.00 plus $.50 handling from The Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1841 Broadway, New York, New York 10023.

9 I discovered this distressing fact during an inservice about the Holocaust presented by Dr. Glenn Earley of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

[10] "Lesbian as Teacher, Teacher as Lesbian" by Meryl C. Friedman, p.157 from the text *Our Right to Love: A Lesbian Resource Book* produced in cooperation with women of the National Gay Task Force. Editor Ginny Vida.

[11] This was in response to a question asked about "survival mechanisms against prejudice," which was part of a survey of 97 gay and lesbian educators in the US. Complete research results are found in *From Closet to Classroom....A Perspective on Gay and Lesbian Individuals in US schools* , Myrna R. Olson, Ed.D., p. 23. This resource

can be ordered through the University of North Dakota Bookstore, Box 8197 University Station, Grand Forks, North Dakota 58202.

[12] Ibid. Here a High School English teacher responds to this survey question: How had stereotypes of gay/lesbian individuals personally and professionally affected her.

[13] *Socrates, Plato and Guys Like Me,* Eric Rofes, p. 49, Alyson Publications, 1985.

[14] David Wilson, a graduate student in Education did pursue this dream of mine by publishing a bibliography in *English Journal* entitled "The Open Library: Y.A. Books for Gay Teens," (November 1984, p.60). The subsequent uproar and harassment that this article caused for Mr. Wilson is outlined in a later article called "Publish and Perish: A Writer Learns a New Version of an Old Cliche" *English Journal* p. 36 April 1986.

Finally, I am happy to share "We Are Here," a publication of the Gay Youth Community Coalition of the Bay Area, P.O. Box 846, San Francisco, CA 94101. Information on resources such as crisis services, housing, legal assistance and student groups is provided. I received information about this service from the Bay Area Network for Gay and Lesbian Educators, 584 Castro St. Suite 173, San Francisco, CA 94114

M. Eugenia Rosa

Maestra, no tiene hijos?
No m'hija, you are my children.
Maestra, no esta´ casada?
no mi'ija I am not married
I love women. I love a woman.
you know her well, she is your teacher too
my comadre

I dare not tell you aloud.
you would go home and ask your parents those embarassing questions:
But I thought you said that only men and women could be in love:
But what do they do?
But can they have kids?
But....?

Better to be a mute model of an
independent
strong
woman
yes it is possible

better this empowered silence than to allow you to be
misguided by
your parents'/community's/media's/nation's
misinformation about gays in the schools.

"Maestra, what's that on your arms?"
"Those are muscles, my friend."
"Oh! my dad has some of those."
"Look. What's that on your arms?

See you have muscles too"

and with the full stature of an 8 year old man child
Jose comes to me and says
teacher, Manuel just called me faggot.
(this is Jose who uses classroom tempra to paint his nails,
plays "handball" like a samurai,
walks swishy down the halls, swinging the bathroom pass
like a flapper's beads)
"do you know what the word faggot means?"
"yeah"
"Can you describe it?"
"yeah" *shuffle shuffle, head drops* it's a boy who loves other boys."
"Is that true for you?
eyes crystal clear, full contact "yeah"
then I guess that there's no problem that Manuel called you faggot, is there?"
"nope" *grin from ear to ear*
"Hey, Manuel..."

Miss Is A Lesbian: The Experience Of A White Lesbian Teacher In A Boys' School

Caroline Sidaway

It is impossible to be sanguine about the daily experience of a lesbian or gay teacher in school. Although in putting together this article, I have talked with a group of gay and lesbian teachers, white indigenous, black and hispanic, the experience here is predominantly my own—white, middle-class, ostensibly able-bodied, and therefore it is a limited view.

My first thought was to open by writing about what I as a lesbian teacher have to offer to the institution in which I work and the children I meet. So I catch myself starting at the familiar point of justifying my existence, explaining why as a lesbian teacher there is a willing, or enforced, giving up of the separation between the 'professional' and the 'private,' and how that refusal to split can represent a politics which often makes 'working' a daily battling for survival. To spell out my experience is necessary because so many heterosexual teachers would so much rather I kept quiet, and did not declare myself.

I walk from my room to the staff room and the boys are running, pushing, fighting, listening to music, lounging against the radiators, the top dogs are there, watching tense to run and hit, tense to laugh and I pass—easy for them to call out. These are children, aren't they, and I saw most when they were eleven, but now it's practising the street corner routine. I prefer a big crowd to walk in—what's worse is a hall almost empty and their careless bodies calling out 'baggy trousers'—a mild remark. It scares me. That's three seconds to walk past and I'm a woman, a lesbian. They're practising.

'Hallo love,' says one.

'Jim, you don't have to speak to me like that.'

'What's wrong with love?'

'Nothing when you know what it means,' I reply.

As a lesbian feminist teacher in a boys' school what I want to offer to boys is some support in challenging the current oppressive definitions of what it is to be a man. I am not interested in creating a new hero, I think the rehabilitation process should be carried out by men, but I at the moment would not agree to letting men do it on their own. 'But that's what men are like'—I've heard heterosexual men and women say that in the staff room—a view which only serves to let men off the hook since it suggests men can't change and almost that it is not their fault, they're like that, maybe men are born like that...

A Paradoxical Position

A lesbian feminist teaching boys is in a paradoxical position. My approach is not to try to identify the 'gay' student in each of my groups and to give him some special attention. I want to engage all the students in becoming aware of, and examining, the conditioning process which damages all of us, which conditions us towards accepting heterosexuality as 'the real world.' In journeying to find out why homosexual experience and politics is seen as aberrant, a student, a colleague will have to think carefully through his/her own experience and ask—what world is challenged by homosexual experience? What world does a radical gay politics envision? Where do I stand in relation to this? It is easy enough to plan a radical curriculum, to see that books and classroom materials need replacing. What is difficult is to imagine how this radical curriculum could

adhere in the ideological ground occupied by schools at the moment.

Every day the lesbian and gay teacher is involved in making a different ground—a meeting point between his/her experience and the homophobic attitudes expressed by the school—students and teachers. S/he needs this ground to walk on—it is not just an ideological exercise but a necessary condition for survival. Each day the white male gay teacher in this school runs the gauntlet of a barrage of insult—'AIDS victim', 'battyman', 'bender.' If he is known to be gay, boys may well run round the run clutching their bottoms and refuse to come to detentions in case he 'jumps on' them.

A Vulnerable Position

When I start trying to describe my position as a white lesbian in this school, my first thought is of my boots, how I now wear a soft version of 'Doctor Martins'—no steel toe caps, but they look hard. And I know what hard means too, something like tough and stylish. Looking at my boots I see something aggressive and puzzling—these boots offer no real protection, nor can they be easily linked to a particular gender. A few years ago, it came as a shock to realise that I was walking round dressed in dark clothes almost like school uniform. I had borrowed the appearance of the students in order to give me some protection. I was even pushed into the dinner queue twice by a member of the staff.

In a vulnerable position anything can be picked on. And wearing skirts won't help. Being assertive in the classroom, refusing to be flirted with, challenging any sexist or heterosexist comments, I am still described as 'being like a man.' As a lesbian teacher I am also taunted by the images of so-called 'lesbian behaviour' which the boys (and the staff?) have culled from pornographic videos and magazines. 'Dirty lesbian,' 'Greenham lesbian' shouted out of the window, screamed down the corridor, pornographic scratchings on desk tops and walls leave no room for dialogue. 'Miss is a lesbian' is written on my door. 'So what' I write beneath. I go on existing. I go on teaching my lessons. Maybe on some days the atmosphere is soft enough. I have enough energy to take an insult into a conversation, to 'talk it through' with a student, to re-interpret physically threatening behaviour as a quest for information.

However it is very rare that the current of homophobia lessens enough for this creative point to be explored by the teacher and student(s) at the same time. This is the common ground I'm talking about.

The 'out' male gay teacher, the lesbian, walks the school as—at best—an advertisement, but always more objectified, 'larger than life,' than the heterosexual teacher. S/he experiences 'acceptance' or rejection—but the solid block of authority which makes these decisions needs shifting, is sure of its right to judge, doesn't want to shift.

Staff Reaction

How do other members of staff react? In the case of the white gay male teacher in this predominantly male staffroom, circles which pride themselves on being progressive see him as a 'mascot,' an opportunity to show their liberalism—and even a person with whom to flirt—to try out a pose or a stance, a 'little patch for their wildness to grow in. "Gary's all right. He's a poof." When a white gay male teacher in a relatively high position in the hierarchy chose to bring his harassment to the attention of the powers that be — in order perhaps to test out their attitudes/politics/procedure—what happened was that the 'problem' was personalised, it was for the gay teacher to deal with, after all, hadn't he brought it upon himself by being visible? Is it this same analysis which prevents any information supporting or acknowledging young gay experience from being pinned up in the sixth form room? And when the school's gay teacher group gave support to a sixth form boy who had begun to identify as gay they were attacked as 'encouraging him.' An 'out' gay teacher acts as a lifeline to students struggling with their feelings, but this help is seen by the authority as subversive. Because these feelings are not celebrated, but seen as troublesome and dangerous, the support we can give is pushed into limited, and at times furtive, channels. Nor am I referring to the few students who call themselves gay before they leave school. Gay and lesbian teachers are 'used' in many ways—a students' quest for talk and information about sensual feelings may well be focussed on the gay teacher who is perceived as a sexual being; whether he or she welcomes that perception or not.

As a white lesbian in a boys' school I am in an even more vulnerable position than my white gay male colleagues. How can I trust the hierarchy to support me when I share with that hierarchy no common language or experience? If men are not the centre of my world, then why am I coming to them for help? I am likely to cause them trouble, to make them uncomfortable. Is it any wonder that lesbians and gay men put in so much time and energy on Anti-Sexist Initiatives, Equal Opportunities Policies, Gender Issues—who else shares our urgency?

Despite my commitment to working in these areas, I still feel some disquiet; resentment at always being looked to as an authority on 'sexual politics' (I think my position as keeper of other people's consciences can only mean I do most of the work), and anger, that as a lesbian who has her own share of internalized homophobia, I put precious energy into starting a women's group—and then felt I could not use this group to support me in my specific harassment as a lesbian— in case it frightened off the women who had already found it difficult to come to a 'women only' meeting. In any school-based group meeting around anti-sexist, anti-racist issues I worry in case opening my mouth will discredit the very cause I am supporting. 'Of course she is bound to speak up'—and of course I do.

Choices

When I came into the staffroom one afternoon and talked about being harassed by a group of extremely hostile boys into saying that I was (am) a lesbian, I was given a great deal of attention by members of my Department — and there was caring and attention too. No one in that sizable group said a word which suggested they had experienced anything like this at all — and I expect that was an act of respect. Speaking in such a way, one to many, I was set apart—made holy by suffering, made special. Their silence was warm and supportive I suppose—could I also dare to call it ignorant, culpably naive? Can I turn to this group and say 'Tell me how you also suffer—and if not, why not? What does it cost you to stay outside this?'—but I didn't. I was too tired at that time and I think now you can't invite someone to take part in a revolution. It happens in all of us and we have a choice to notice that opportunity or not. If we were all allies, working to create greater choices, of

all kinds, then the line which is drawn by the heterosexual 'world' between myself and their world would be non-existent. Each of us would be as vulnerable to the oppressive assumptions of mainstream society as I am, as all gay teachers are at the moment. I've spent years here redefining the struggle so that it includes everyone. I've looked around the staffroom and thought if it seems to me important that the boys see examples of men loving each other, then whoever teaches *Of Mice and Men* may also agree with me. And now I feel like saying to my heterosexual colleagues, 'you tell me what's urgent for you—if you don't show your rejection of mainstream attitudes about relating, then you are colluding with them.' It is always the burden of the homosexual teacher to identify and explain and point to all solutions.

I know so little of what hurts a heterosexual man about how the boys are in this school, though I've heard plenty of 'righteous indignation'—a kind of heavy anger which hunts for a victim to punish and takes no responsibility for the world-view which this 'victim' has internalized.

Example—two boys tangling in the corridor. I ask them to stop, they don't. A senior male teacher appears. 'Stop cuddling each other' he says and they spring apart. His words hurt us all. Homophobia. Doesn't he want to feel close, to touch other men? I'm a lesbian. I do touch women —love them—same sex as myself. I want people to cuddle each other. I want men to cuddle each other.

Where are the allies of gay teachers and lesbians? I spent forty minutes with a group of boys talking about how I felt when they added verses to a song which praised Peter Sutcliffe—which they expected me to read. I saw again this studied/learned indifference to the brutal killing of women (they're only slags anyway'). The change came when one boy said, 'It's all right for you, Miss, you've got a room in school, you can put what you like on the wall, but if we say anything like you say then we're called "poof," "queer."' And I was able then to say, it is hard to be in a minority and we need to help each other—and that I was saying all this so they'd feel strong enough to be the kind of men who would challenge other men's violence to women, or at least not join in finding it acceptable or funny.

Exhausted I walked into the staffroom and spoke to a woman friend of mine (lovers with a man). I told her what had

happened and she said, about the boys and what to do with them, 'Shoot the lot!' Is this a different political analysis? Or am I out of touch with reality? Either way I lose. After a lesson spent trying to assure boys that playing with dolls is okay, listening to them saying it will turn you into a 'poofter,' a 'queer,'—trying to direct them to the vast conditioning process which teaches them this rubbish, I return to find 'Anti-Man,' 'Man Hater' scrawled on my door. My heterosexual male colleagues tell me, in their kindness this is the way it is with male adolescents, this is the way it *was* too—in other words, a message of acceptance. These heterosexual men who spoke are too comfortable for me to believe in their anti-sexism and I detect a strong desire for me not to rock the boat.

Challenges

Obviously, at issue here is how, if at all, a radical gay man or lesbian can exist as a teacher in the authoritarian structure of the school. S/he seeks a radical altering of the way boys and staff relate together, to each other—she challenges the world view which the institution peddles. She may seek to subvert the institution from within, and knows that in so doing she can expect little support or understanding. This is how things stand.

Yet the ILEA is an Equal Opportunities employer. It demands anti-racist/anti-sexist/anti-classist policies and practices to be developed in schools. (Where is the pressure to challenge oppressive attitudes towards disablement, physical/experiental difference?) The facts/debates/politics of lesbian and gay experience must not only be allowed to enter the institution of the school but must be allowed to *change* that institution. Until then the lesbian/gay teacher remains embattled until her strength or optimism runs out. The politics of fairness are a revolutionary politics. They are the same politics which provide the impetus challenging racism, the existing class structure, and oppressive attitudes towards disability. This is a vision of a fair world. But if the group who demand that we all examine the way we love each other are pushed out, and by this group I mean gay men and lesbians, then how fair is the vision which is left.

All oppressions are interconnected. There is a silence in this

article about the specific experience of all except white gay men (partial) and my own experience as a white lesbian. I have written this article anonymously. I have also been silent about my experience as a lesbian with an invisible disability. To have said more would be to have made myself and my friends more easily recognizable. There is also my sense that writing this article is like throwing meat into the lion's den. Until the 'lions' begin to change, starting from themselves, then there are some details of experience which cannot be shared.

I'm a white feminist lesbian, born in 1950 in England with three sisters. I live in England, in a women's house, co-parenting a daughter (I'm a non-biological mother) and teaching in a boy's comprehensive school. I have poetry in collections published by Onlywomen's Press, the Women's Press, and Virago. I've begun co-writing plays with Maro Green—'More" (1986) and 'The Memorial Gardens'(1987)—which have helped further my understanding of hidden disability and to start to re-claim my spirituality.

M. Eugenia Rosa

The Book and its Cover

excerpts from the journal of a lesbian teacher

I am of you but I am not from you...
Yes, your child is progressing well.
She is on grade level in reading and math,
and participates actively in our writing response groups.
Vato...I gaze at your tatooed forearms,
hungry to share my permanent talisman,
co-outlaws we are and
Yes of course we share the interest in your child's progress.
And do you think you could go to the library together to keep
her interest in reading high?
'horale 'mano We will never meet

vision doble	double vision
huera	empty
escondida en la sombra del umbral vislumbro al mundo de la mayoria	hidden in the threshold's shadow I peek at the majority's world
separada	separate
de mis hermanas latinas por la facha güera de la familia europea por vivir en Amérika de la vida americana por no rezar a Dinero de los campesinos por ser profesional de mi nombre propio por ser lesbiana	from my latin sisters because my complexion is fair from my european family because I live in America from American life because I don't pray to Money from field workers because I am a professional from my very name because I am a lesbian
Soy todo y nada a la vez, la renombrada persona sin pais.	At once I am everything and nothing, the fabled person without a country.

Ahora, hablemos del prejucio!

Literacy and the Lesbian/Gay Learner

Ellen Louise Hart

Millions of Americans have never learned to read and write. How many are lesbians and gay men and how might homophobia be helping to enforce their illiteracy? As teachers what can we do? Before I address these questions I want to present some premises about homosexuality and education[1] and follow with a definition of literacy. I want to make clear that homosexuality is not a "controversial issue"; it is a way of loving, living, creating homes and rituals, communities, cultures and cultural artifacts. Homosexuality can not be reduced to a private act that belongs in the bedroom and not in the classroom. Sexuality is much more than sex; it is integral to identity, culture, and all of life. It is personal, and the personal, as we know, is the political. Then, as teachers it is essential for us to recognize that since an estimated ten per cent of the population is lesbian or gay, at any given time in any given classroom, from kindergarten to the university, ten percent of our students will be, or will become, lesbian or gay. Others will be bisexual, and twenty—five per cent will have a lesbian or gay family member. Education that is true to its name presents accurate information about homosexuality and includes lesbian, gay, and bisexual perspectives throughout the entire curriculum. This integration provides opportunity for our

students to raise their self-esteem, to develop values based on knowledge rather than predjudice and dogma, and to learn.

By literacy I mean the ability to function independently in the society as a reader and writer, not only being able to read road signs and the ingredients on packages of food, to read bills and write checks, but to read, with comprehension and ease, newspapers and magazines, stories and poems and textbooks, to write, fluently, letters, journals, stories, and papers. Then there is another level of literacy that moves beyond the performance of concrete tasks to the creation of self, world, and identity. What is different about this process of becoming literate for a lesbian or gay man? The most fundamental difference is the need for particular texts that represent lesbian and gay experience and consciousness, the experience and consciousness of individual lesbians and gay men. Our lesbian and gay students need to know that they exist and that they exist in print. Literacy also requires the writing skills to enable the continuing creation of these representations. The claims I bring to this discussion of literacy are that the acts of reading and writing are acts of creation, not peripheral but essential to all education and all learning. Gay and lesbian students have special needs as learners in a patriarchal, heterosexist, homophobic society where their lives and experience are largely absent or misrepresented.

A Classroom Climate Survey, conducted in 1984 at Berkeley by the Associated Students of the University of California (ASUC), found that lesbian and gay students were the most uncomfortable in class, more than any other ethnic minority group, women, or the disabled. While I am ill at ease with this comparison of oppressions and do not believe that this kind of suffering can ever be measured, the ASUC study supports my claim that throughout elementary, secondary, and post—secondary education, lesbian and gay students are deeply hurt. Like any other people, lesbians and gay men have an overwhelming need to see themselves made visible. Not only are these needs not being attended to, lesbian and gay students frequently must sit in silence while abusive comments about homosexuality and homosexuals made by their peers are tolerated, condoned, echoed by their teachers. The same ASUC study found that "82% of lesbian and gay students surveyed had been subjected to pejorative stereotypical comments about

homosexuals by instructors.[2]" A 1983 University of California Lesbian and Gay Intercampus Network (UCLGIN) study found that only thirteen per cent of student, faculty, staff, and alumni surveyed at the nine U.C. campuses considered that lesbian and gay topics "had been adequately covered in courses where they should have been treated."[3] The Berkeley Multicultural Lesbian and Gay Studies Program (MLGS), a student organization, has been working for the past five years to encourage faculty to develop courses and curriculum on lesbian and gay issues. They argue:

> The lesbian and gay perspective has been systematically omitted from the University's course offerings. . .The roots of the omission. . . are not hard to find. The UCLGIN survey revealed that thirty—six per cent of the faculty responding that lesbian/gay topics were appropriate to their fields had refrained from doing research on these topics because of fear of negative reaction from colleagues, while forty—one per cent had refrained from including such material in their courses. Forty—four percent of students refrained from doing research or coursework for the same reason, and fourteen per cent were actually advised by faculty not to pursue these topics.[4]

These UC surveys are useful for establishing a view of the censorship and the suffering of lesbian and gay students. And yet, it is at this end of the educational process, a place only the most select group ever reaches, where it is possible to find any opportunity to take a course and engage in a discussion concerning homosexuality; the picture in elementary and secondary schools is far worse.

I now want to turn to the classroom to consider the contradictions of a theory of teaching writing based on the idea of freedom of expression for a student, lesbian or gay, who is not free, who is taboo, silenced and made invisible. In *Writing Without Teachers* (1973) and *Writing With Power* (1981), Peter Elbow pioneered the technique of an automatic, non—stop, timed, restrictionless writing called "free writing." "Even if someone reads it, it doesn't send any ripples," Elbow writes.[5] "Free" is also a key word for educator John Holt: "People get

better at using language when they use it to say things they really want to say to people they really want to say them to, in a context in which they can express themselves freely and honestly."[6] On the one hand how "free" is any student ever in a class that is part of a program that is part of an institution that is part of a system that is hierarchical, authoritarian, racist, classist, sexist, and so on? Still, for some students there can be something freeing about freewriting, particularly because students need not share the ideas they have generated with an audience. But this exercise is often followed by a sharing exercise that is part of the process of developing the idea. As Elbow puts it, the next step after freewriting, sharing, is the "essential human act at the heart of writing."[7]

My point here is that a student who is lesbian or gay may not feel that she can express herself freely and honestly and she will therefore censor herself. She may fear "ripples" from the teacher or even more from her peers in the class. And so she will divert her first and best, her most vital idea, and the work of getting better at using language is getting undone. A non-gay student may be more likely than the gay student to feel free. To illustrate this point I will use an experience I had teaching in a community college adult literacy program.

A woman came into my beginning writing class. I gave her paper and asked her to write a letter introducing herself. She began to write and by the end of the class had four or five pages to read to me. She had written about a man in the Navy she'd married, about how unhappy she'd been cooped up alone when he wouldn't let her go out at night, how he brought his friends home and demanded she fix dinner for them, how she began to break away from him, had a relationship secretly with another man and finally left her husband, how he tried to get her back and she wouldn't go. "Whew!" she said as she went out the door. "I just had to get that down on paper." I never saw the student again. But somehow this had been an important moment for her. She felt the need to tell her story in writing and she had presumed that she would be free to do it.

How many of my students did not feel free? How many censored their topics? Kept their journal writing secret or separate from school writing? Gave up on their writing because they didn't know what to say? In the literacy program students first learning to write describe family reunions and wedding

anniversaries (some community college writing programs actually call a section of their program emphasizing personal experience writing "the engagement ring unit"), but they do not write coming out stories or portraits of gay relationships. And I know there are gay and lesbian students in the class, not only because of statistics, but because gays are not as invisible to themselves as they are to others. I decide that the man getting teased by other students in the class, who is thrilled to be interviewing someone who used to know Prince (the pre-"Purple Rain" androgynous Prince), has to be gay; that the teacher and counselor who helped Gina get off drugs and finish high school was a woman and Gina is probably a lesbian. And sure enough. There they are in the gay bar, at the gay pride and freedom day parade, along with others I've recognized, none of whom ever wrote anything explicit about being gay. I don't know if that was a conscious decision or how painful it was, how much it hurt their development as a writer, when the split between the speakable and the unspeakable will catch up with them, how much longer they will stay in school, keep writing, keep reading, keep encouraging their children, their parents to read and to write.

Luis, who dropped out of the program, sees me one morning in a local, lesbian owned and operated breakfast spot. "I'm thinking of coming back to school," he tells me. "I can't understand what I read in the newspaper. And I talk so fast I can't write. This is the right time for me. You know, I've got no kids, no wife"—he's talking fast and watching me—"no husband to support." Luis is coming out to me. And he's checking out how safe and comfortable my classroom might be.

Another example of how self-censorship affects a gay student is Walter, whose work I followed over a period of several years. He repeatedly cycled through the college writing courses, dropping out at the highest level and re—enrolling himself in entry level classes. In my intermediate course he wrote his papers in the third person, referring to himself as "junior." His first essay described a suicide attempt which he explained was a plea for attention from his father. In his last essay he researched the founding of the Sears Roebuck Company. (His reason for the project was to find out whether or not Roebuck was black since he had found contradictory information about this.) The essay took him a year to write; he took an incomplete in the course and finally turned in a report

that said very little. A year later Walter came into a beginning writing class I was teaching because he had taken an incomplete in a literature course and he wanted an opportunity to work on an essay on *Huckleberry Finn*. After two weeks of pouring over criticism, unable to put a word of his own on paper, he dropped out.

I use Walter as an example of a motivated and ambitious student (he often talked about transferring to a four year university and becoming a teacher) afraid to have an idea of his own. I don't want to appear to be simplifying the complexity of his problems with school and with writing which clearly amount to a deeply rooted psychological block. I would like research to be available that will help to explain how his position in the world as a gay man—and as a gay black man—influences his ability to write and to learn.

I want to use one more example from my teaching—a University of California student enrolled in a composition and rhetoric course. On the first day of class Nathan is describing a night at a gay bar, responding to an assignment to describe a recent event showing something about his values, traditions, or culture. He watches closely as I glance over the paper, measuring my reaction to his subject, a topic he can censor in the future depending on my response. Later he writes essays, oblique, and convoluted about "universal oppressions" and how we all "have to struggle against them," until I call him into a writing conference. "Why don't you be more clear?" I ask him. "I've been afraid to," he says. While others lucidly defend abortion rights, civil rights, religious freedom, only Nathan is writing about gay rights, and he writes vaguely and self-consciously.

Homophobia advises our students not to write clearly. Self-censorship and fear of our response keep lesbian and gay students from "getting power through voice."[8] "Real voice," Peter Elbow calls it. "Nothing stops you," he writes, "from writing now, today words that people will want to read. Nothing stops you, that is, but your fear or unwillingness or lack of familiarity with what I am calling your real voice." As the quarter progressed Nathan became increasingly vocal about his politics, in class discussions never specifically mentioning gay issues, but coming close as he spoke about gender stereotyping and oppression. Neither did I encourage him to be more specific

in these discussions, even though I know that specificity is at the root of critical thinking.

How might things have been different for Nathan, Walter, Gina, Luis, and others? For one thing, I was not "out" in the classroom; I included no readings on lesbian and gay issues; I reinforced their silence as well as the split in their lives: for them, like them, I was gay in the bars and at the parades, but never in the classroom. As I write this, I'm aware of a sense that I failed these students and that I now must ask myself—that as lesbian and gay teachers and academics we all must ask ourselves: what are our attitudes toward our gay and lesbian students? What kinds of responsibility do we have? How are we similar to and different from other members of the profession who identify with students like themselves; male teachers, male students; feminist teachers, feminist students; black teachers, black students? As lesbian and gay teachers how does our invisibility affect our teaching and our students' lives?

I am reminded of an English professor I had in the mid-seventies, a formidible woman who lived with another formidible woman, also of the English Department. This professor raised an eyebrow at me one morning as I excused myself from her survey of great literature (all of it written by men) in order to attend "Women's Day" activities. On the program I held out to her, she pointed first to the "Lesbian Workshop" at the college that day, then to the "Lesbian Workshop" to follow during "Women's Weekend" at a neighboring college. "I see you're both using the same language," she said, her face a mask. Puzzled and embarrassed, I hastily assured her we didn't want to exclude anyone, and she nodded me away.

Looking back I would say that in three years I read two pieces of "lesbian literature" with this professor who travelled to far away mid—western universities to lecture on Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein. Our class session on *Three Women* was devoted entirely to Stein's use of grammar. During our discussion of Henry James' *The Bostonians* —her favorite women's writer, she told us—there was no mention of the lesbian relationship between the two main characters, and I could only get up the nerve, finally, to approach her after class one day to ask if she would please stop using the term "women's lib." Her housemate and colleague used similar tactics: she was

primarily responsible for the department's veto of Virginia Woolf as required reading. When I asked about some earlier writing she had done on Edna St. Vincent Millay, she told me shortly that she preferred to disclaim it. The picture of these two women shows most poignantly my experience with teachers who refrain from openly conducting or encouraging discussion of love between women. When I speak of the intellectual growth denied lesbian and gay students, I speak from my own memory of suffocating censorship.

In her "Foreword" to *The Coming Out Stories*, Adrienne Rich asks the reader to view in her mind millions of pages of women's writing censored, concealed, lost, burned:

> As you read the stories in this book I would like you to think of those piles of ash, those cages behind which women's words, lesbian words, lie imprisoned. . . . This is poverty. This is starvation. This is cultural imperialism—the decision made by one group of people that another group shall be cut off from their past, shall be kept from the power of memory, context, continuity. This is why lesbians, meeting, need to tell and retell stories like the ones in this book. In the absence of the books we needed, the knowledge of women whose lives were like our own, an oral tradition—here set down on paper—has sustained us.[9]

Like Rich I believe that the "coming out story," the lesbian narrative, has a central position in the making of lesbian history and culture. (An interesting question, and subject for research, is whether the coming out story has a similar role in the making of gay male culture.) But I wonder about the notion of an oral tradition. Lesbians do tell their stories to each other, in small private circles; yet it seems to me that peculiar to lesbian culture is its extreme dependence on writing.

Because of the taboo surrounding lesbian experience and the profound isolation surrounding many lesbian women, writing has a special place in the coming out process, and this is not only true for women who have access to education. I suspect that the coming out story is shared with one other, the woman with whom the experience is lived, and then very often the story is

put down in writing—in the form of a poem, journal entry, a letter. I believe that lesbians rarely have access to the power Paule Marshall attributes to "the poets in the kitchen," the "set of giants" who taught "the first lesson in the narrative art."[10] Describing her mother and her mother's friends who "suffered a triple invisibility, being black, female and foreigners," Marshall writes: "Given the kind of women they were, they couldn't tolerate the fact of their invisibility, their powerlessness. And they fought back, using the only weapon at their command: the spoken word." [11]Lesbians do not have the kitchen table tradition Marshall shows us here, or Cherríe Moraga describes in "La Güera," "the sounds of my mother and aunts gossiping—half in English, half in Spanish—while drinking cerveza in the kitchen."[12] We do not have the words of our mothers, aunts, grandmothers around us. We inherit invisibility and silence.

There *is* a shared language among lesbians and often it originates from books. In the "Preface" to *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds,* Judy Grahn, lesbian poet and cultural worker, describes sources for her research:

> I have recalled my utter isolation at sixteen, when I looked up *Lesbian* in the dictionary, having no one to ask about such things, terrified, elated, painfully self—aware, grateful it was there at all. Feeling the full weight of the social silence surrounding it. I have gone over and over in my mind the careful teaching my first lover Von gave me, as she recited in strictest secrecy the litany of words and phrases related to the forbidden subject of our being.[13]

This list, Grahn remembers, included a "mysterious word she had no definition for: *catafoil. . . . Catafoil,* I now believe, came from a Gay book Von read while standing in a drug store—a habit she had, especially with Gay books since it was socially embarrassing if not dangerous to buy them."[14] Grahn argues that an oral tradition exists among lesbians and she traces origins of that tradition. What is striking is that much of the oral tradition has its roots in writing.

Grahn followed *Another Mother Tongue* with *The Highest Apple: Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition,* which began as a chapter of the first book and grew too large. In her introduction she writes:

> Poetry is important to women, and it is especially important to Lesbians. More than one Lesbian has been kept from floundering on the rocks of alienation from her own culture, her own center, by having access, at least, to lesbian poetry. We owe a great deal to poetry; two of our most important names, for instance: Lesbian and Sapphic. When has a larger group of humans, more pervasive behavior, and much more than this, the tradition of women's secret powers that such names imply, ever been named for a single poet?[15]

Writing sustains lesbians. Our "weapon" against our isolation and oppression has traditionally been the written word. For lesbians, then, the consistent culture is the written culture—and we have had to be very vigilant to keep that culture consistent, to sift through the ashes of women's writing, to piece together Sappho's fragments, to keep the books on our kitchen tables and beside our beds. Lesbian and gay cultures have a unique dependency on literacy, and lesbians and gay men must be able to read and to write their own stories if the culture and the people are to survive.

Finally, I want to focus on necessity. There are many questions I can not explore here about how need manifests itself for lesbian and gay learners. Jonathan Kozol writes about the cycle of illiteracy in *Illiterate America*. How many of those parents who pass illiteracy on to their children are gay and lesbian? What might the relationship be of illiteracy to the spread of AIDS in terms of accessibility to information about the disease? And what about the relationship of literacy to healing? Journal writing is often used in workshops for incest survivors (see Ellen Bass's work, especially *I Never Told Anyone: Writings by Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*) and in work on recovering from alcoholism and substance abuse (see Jean Swallow, ed., *Out From Under: Sober Dykes and Our Friends*) and in work on healing from abusive relationships (see

Naming the Violence: Speaking Out About Lesbian Battering, ed. Kerry Lobel for the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence Lesbian Task Force). And what role might literacy have in healing from Sex and Love Addiction, from depression? (I think of the last verse of a song Bonnie Raitt has recorded:

> Tonight I'm sitting learning how to read
> Because in school I never liked to
> It's just one of the little things I'm going to need
> As I go on living my life without you.)

These are questions that can open up new areas in the study of literacy in America.

I want to end with the words of two participants in a summer writing workshop for teachers who expressed their need when I pushed the group to begin to think about how lesbian and gay students are being censored. What I wanted to do as a member of that group was create a space in which the lesbian and gay students (there were five of us in a class of twenty) could voice our particular concerns, could speak and write our experience as gay and lesbian teachers. What happened was that I tried for three days in a row to bring the issue to the table. The first day no one responded. The second day someone agreed that it was an important subject but it then got lost. On the third day, late in the morning, the group leader asked me to bring the matter up after a break. Here are two freewritings that came out of that moment. Sam wrote:

> My father is gay. He has lived with the same man for almost fourteen years, one year less than my parents' marriage lasted. Ellen tells me that 25% of the population has an immediate family member who is gay, 10% are gay themselves. I never knew this as a teenager. No one ever talked about it. We never dealt with it in school.
>
> For me, in adolescence—a time of great pain and change for even the happiest of us, my father's homosexuality was something I had to bear alone. It was something I discussed with no one. It increased my sense of isolation. Running was my place of belonging and to a great extent my coach

played the role of my father. I believe if I could have written about this, it would have helped me to accept my father on his own terms much sooner.

Homophobia is a prejudice that must be dealt with in the classroom. To ignore it is criminal.

Alice wrote:

> The room grew strangely silent. This group of expressive, committed, open—minded people seemed suddenly uncomfortable. My heart leaped into my throat, all my blood began to tingle. And I too remained silent. I who love to say what I think, especially regarding issues I know something about.
>
> They have murdered us, burned us at the stake and in the gas chambers. They have taken our children from us. They have fired us from jobs and blacklisted us. They have cross—referenced us in the card catalogs with abnormal psychology, "see also suicide and depression." They have separated us from our mates, our lovers. They have arrested and incarcarated us. They have banned us from public participation. They have silenced us.
>
> And that's the overt oppression.
>
> The covert oppression is standing next to my lover at my brother's wedding and having to listen to my uncle making cracks about my not being married. Or watching a young person in school struggle with her sexual identity, wanting to offer myself as an example, but remaining mute.
>
> Realizations are stirring me to the core. I can no longer sit here in silence.
>
> Gay issues are issues which affect us all. These are issues not of sexuality and lifestyle alone. They are issues of political, religious and intellectual freedom.

The writings by these two teachers are coming out stories, just as the writing I am doing now is part of my own continuing story. Clearly, we can not tell or teach any one else's story until we are free to tell and to be told our own.

[1]Helping to inform these premises are *Demystifying Homsexuality: A Teaching Guide About Lesbians and Gay Men,* published by the Human Rights Foundation, and Alicia's Abramson's "TA's Guide for Overcoming Homophobia In The Classroom," UC Berkeley.

[2]Proposal to Vice-Chancellor Roderic Park for campus funding of the Multicultural Lesbian and Gay Studies Program, U.C. Berkeley, June 30, 1986.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973)p.3.

[6]*Handbook for Planning An Effective Writing Program* (California State Department of Education, 1983) p. 69.

[7]Peter Elbow, *Writing With Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) p.20.

[8]Ibid. p.304.

[9]Adrienne Rich, "Foreword," *The Coming Out Stories,* eds. Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe, (Watertown, Massachusetts: Persephone Press, 1980) xi-xii.

[10]Paule Marshall, from "The Poets in the Kitchen," *The Borzoi College Reader,* eds. Charles Muscatine and Marlene Griffith (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1984) p. 81

[11]Marshall, p. 78.

[12]Cherrie Moraga, "La Güera," *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color,* eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1981) p. 31

[13]Judy Grahn, *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) xii.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Judy Grahn, *The Highest Apple: Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition* (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1985) xii.

I was born in Maine, grew up in Vermont, and have spent the last ten years living in Oakland and Berkeley, Santa Cruz, and currently San Jose. I teach writing at UC Santa Cruz, where I'm also doing graduate work in Literature with special interests in lesbian poetry and representations of lesbians and gay men in fiction. Two teaching dreams are to do literacy work in rural Vermont and to become a part of a Lesbian/Gay Studies Program.

Four Good Reasons Why Every Lesbian Teacher Should Be Free to Come Out in the Classroom

Sarah-Hope Parmeter

I teach writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and I am one of those few lesbian teachers who is able to come out to my students as well as my colleagues. I never really decided to start coming out. Instead, coming out just seemed a natural part of my developing teaching style, the increasingly honest and passionate bonds I was forging with my students. Coming out was part of my way of demonstrating the commitment we'd made to one another.

That doesn't mean coming out is always easy. Every time I do it, I am at least nervous. Sometimes I am terrified. But I do it anyway. Coming out is automatic with me—the decision is too unconscious for me to regulate it. At this point, I don't know how I'd manage in a job that doesn't allow me to come out the way I can now. Nervousness aside, the freedom and sense of self are intoxicating.

Too many of us who are teachers may never be free enough to come out even to our colleagues, let alone to our students, but I think it's worthwhile to look at the rewards we can reap from being visibly lesbian in the classroom. I am a good teacher,

confident, engaging, and encouraging, and I think much of the quality of my work is a result of my openness. My experience has shown me that in choosing to persecute lesbian and gay teachers, most of our society has chosen to significantly lower its quality of education as well. I want to use this space to remind ourselves of the strengths we could have, do have, as teachers simply because we are who we are.

1. Coming Out Makes Lesbian Teachers More Comfortable in the Classroom Because We Know Our Students See Us for Who We Are

I teach best when my classroom feels like "home," and for me, making the classroom home means coming out. I don't like living a life that's divided into separate bits, where I can be just part of myself. I never want to be just a lesbian or just a teacher. I want to be a *lesbian teacher*. I want the university to see me as that. I want my students to see me as that. Because I wouldn't be the teacher I am, I wouldn't be able to work with my students the way I do if I weren't a lesbian.

Sometimes being a lesbian is hard. I get sick of having to explain myself every time I turn around, having to constantly challenge a world dominated by heterosexual assumptions. Sometimes silence feels tempting. But I like being honest about myself with the people I work with especially my students. Through teaching I've learned that the best writing comes from looking carefully inside ourselves, learning to be honest about what we find there and learning to honesty share what we find with others. I'm open because I want my students to write openly, from the heart. Once they can do this, I know everything they write will be stronger, whether it's a research paper on the war in Afghanistan, a poem cycle on surviving sexual abuse, or a biology field report. All writing, *real* writing, takes courage, takes a part of ourselves, and I feel I need to serve as a model of this process for my students. I talk about how I write, the way writing has come to play a day-to-day role in my life, the things I can't get through until I just stop and write. Other times, I'll explain thoughtfully what I think about a subject, including my uncertainties: I need to let my students know how very much I don't know, how much I am

still their partner in this business of learning. Sometimes I come out.

When I started coming out as a teacher, I came out infrequently and only to individual students. I guess I just assumed that my students weren't used to seeing their teachers as sexual beings. *That* shows how many of the assumptions of the straight world I've absorbed without realizing it—particularly the assumption that being a lesbian is primarily sexual. I say I wouldn't be the teacher I am without being a lesbian, and then I turn around and assume that being open about my lesbianism instantly puts me in the bedroom.

The times I've come out to my students and my classes, I've done it when they couldn't just sexualize me as a lesbian, when they had to recognize that lesbianism is a whole lot more than what goes on in the bedroom. I particularly like coming out to students when I can mention my lesbianism in a sort of side light, as one piece of information that's related to some other subject that we're really focused on—subjects like institutionalized racism and sexism, body image, the current philosophy of the Supreme Court. However I do it, I always feel better after I come out.

I know no matter how egalitarian my relationship with my students may seem, my place in the University does carry some power. Still I try hard to work with them as a partner, a peer. My classrooms are cooperative places where any of us can ask questions or air concerns, and I rely on my students' expertise in other areas as much as they rely on mine in writing. To hide a part of myself, even if only by omission, would change this environment. My students might not understand what was going on, but I would be ashamed to face them, asking for their trust but not giving them mine.

2. When Lesbian Teachers Come Out, Straight Students Gain a New Sensitivity to Gay Issues

Every time I've come out to students, or even just raised gay issues in class, there's been a reward of some kind. By the middle of my second quarter at Santa Cruz, I knew I'd be teaching a gay class the following year, so when students who

enjoyed working with me would ask if I taught any other classes they could take, after taking a deep breath, I'd say, "Next year I'll be teaching an intermediate composition course focusing on lesbian and gay issues. I'd really enjoy working with you in that class." Even though I might feel nervous, I always tried to sound absolutely *normal*, (whatever that is) whenever I described the class.

One student, Sandy, and I had established a strong bond of sharing the unspoken between us. She'd used my class as a chance to write about events from her life that she'd been unable to speak about for years. So when Sandy asked me about other classes I taught, I told her about the lesbian and gay class, I came out to her, and explained why I felt it was so important for people, gay and straight, to work together, to study gay culture and experience. She was interested in the course, but hesitant as well, and our conversation moved on to something else.

I was surprised when Sandy walked into my office several days later to tell me she'd spoken with her mother about the lesbian and gay class. My social conditioning got the best of me, and in the few seconds before her next sentence, worst-case scenarios rushed through my head. Then Sandy explained that her mother had been delighted to hear about the class—one of her best friends was a lesbian and her mother thought it was very important for straight people to try to learn what it means to be gay.

Another student, Johnna, delighted me last year with her proposal for a term paper. She explained that both her parents were gay and that she wanted to find out about the experiences of other children of gay people. I wrote her back a note saying how pleased I was with the topic, that I was a lesbian and wanted to have children someday, so the material she'd cover would be personally significant for me. I pictured Johnna tracking down the children of gay parents, doing interviews, finding reference materials I hadn't known were available.

So I was very disappointed when the first installment of her paper was a short piece on "What Makes People Gay?," drawing primarily on homosexuality-is-an-illness sorts of texts written by straight psychiatrists. I tried to hang on to my "objective" teacher voice, but some of my hurt surely came out in the note I gave her in return. I described my cynicism about the

references she'd used and suggested she look instead for materials written *by* lesbians and gay men about their own development.

What I didn't realize was that the research Johnna had used offered a pretty accurate picture of life in her own family. Her father was an alcoholic who'd drunk himself to death. Her mother was also a substance abuser, unable to provide Johnna with financial or emotional support as she worked her way through school. At eighteen years, Johnna was on her own—and her experience had clearly taught her that homosexuals were emotionally disturbed substance abusers incapable of offering the support one would expect from a family member.

I discovered all of this when I read the next installment of Johnna's term paper, which was essentially an expanded version of the first draft, drawing on examples from her own experience to illustrate the psychiatrists' theories. This time we went over the paper in person. Johnna and I talked about what she'd written. She told me about her home life and the pressures she faced trying to make it through school. I was very honest about how the paper made me feel as a lesbian. I talked about the lesbian parents I know and about my own concerns for raising children. Johnna also told me she'd been questioning her own sexuality—something she didn't mention in the essay—and described the difficulties she'd had finding materials in the University library that offered alternate views. We listened to each other, but I wondered how much either of us had really heard.

On the last day of class, the students spoke briefly about the topics of their term papers, what they'd learned, and the conclusions they'd drawn. When Johnna's turn came, I was surprised to hear her say, "I wound up writing my paper on what causes people to be gay, but now that I'm done, I don't really care. That seems like a stupid question. It only matters what makes people gay if you think it's wrong to turn out gay. If you think being gay is normal, then it doesn't matter. Sure, there are creepy gay people out there, but there are creepy straight people too. I think most gay people must be pretty ok."

One of the students brought up the idea of universal bisexuality and asked Johnna if she thought this was what was really normal. Johnna shrugged her shoulders, "A lot of stuff could be normal. Straight people justify straight sex by saying 'here's this hole and here's this thing to stick into it. It's got to

be right because of how it fits together.' But look at two gay men. You could say here are these *other* holes and here are these things to stick in them. Maybe they're right. Maybe the rest of us have been doing it wrong the whole time." When Johnna finished, complete with illustrative gestures, all of us were laughing.

After that, the same student wanted to know how many people in the class thought homosexuality was wrong. He wanted to take a hand count, but I cut him off. "In the last ten weeks, I've really loved working with all of you. It's meant a lot to me to feel accepted and liked by you. This room feels like a home to me. If any of you think what I am is wrong, I don't want to know about it. It would hurt too much after all the work we've done together and after all the love I've put into teaching you. I just don't want to know." I suggested that if the hand count was really necessary I could leave the room, but the man who'd suggested it said, no, maybe he really didn't want to know either.

I think sometimes I must have a very unrealistic view of the impact my coming out has on my students. On the other hand, I know it does affect them. Despite the fact that one in four of us has a gay family member, the closets keep us from realizing this. Coming straight (as it were) from the homophobia of high school. most of them have never had a conversation, let alone a friendship, with someone they recognize as gay. These students, most of them anyway, do respect me, often love me, so I know when I come out to them they're learning something powerful—lesbians aren't the stereotypes they've found in the movies and in the generalizations of their social groups. Suddenly lesbians (at least one of them) become women worthy of respect, committed and loving teachers, determined to live their own lives with integrity and to inspire integrity in their students. That's the way it is in my classroom, anyway.

But then my students go back to the dorms. At the same time that I'm congratulating myself on the new model of lesbianism I've presented them with, the student computer account is being filled with a violent dialogue between straight students calling for fag bashing and gay students threatening attacks on straights. I hope my students aren't part of this, but some of them may be. It's one thing to comfortably accept a lesbian teacher they only see two or three times a week. After all, they

don't party with me; they don't have to share a dorm room with me. Accepting lesbians, even admitting they might exist closer to home is another matter altogether. Some of my straight students can comfortably carry things this far. They'll support their gay peers and gay student groups on campus. Others may accept and respect me, but never learn to extend that respect to other gay people.

As it turned out, Sandy didn't take the gay class. But she did talk to her mother and heard her mother talk honestly about her respect for her gay friend and for gay culture. Something like that may not seem like much, but I treasure it. I would like to change the world, I would like to be a hero, but I know that just helping a conversation like that to come about is important work. In my own way I *am* changing the world.

3. Coming Out Helps Us Create a Culturally Diverse Classroom

One of the hardest parts of my teaching life was when I taught writing several years ago for Summer Bridge, a University program for incoming students of color. I was determined to have my writing class address issues that were important for my students; I wanted discussions to focus on the powers shaping their lives and the ways in which they could gain control over them. But I was troubled by my identity as a white woman. Who was I to assume I could know what issues were important to them? What right did I have to assume I could understand and share their experiences? I was caught in a bind of being committed to what I thought the course should teach and feeling that who I was effectively precluded me from teaching those things.

One day I decided to attend another of my students' classes so that I could see how that teacher approached them and how they chose to work with together in a different environment. Class that day consisted of a student-led discussion of several feminist essays, including Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." Most of the students seemed to acknowledge the general value of the feminist arguments they were discussing, but all of them, from the most

radical to the most conservative, kept saying, "It takes time." At each "It takes time," I found myself glancing over at their teacher Luisa. We'd lock eyes and exchange a sort of internal grimace or sigh. One of the students (interestingly enough, she was probably the most powerful, self-sustaining woman in the class) quoted Lorde's essay "Perhaps for some of you here today I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am a lesbian, because I am myself," and said, "If I were all that, I wouldn't say it! I'd sure be silent!"

Luisa ended the class, but the students, who'd been throwing occasional glances at me that I'd managed to brush off, refused to leave the room until I told them what I thought. Instantly my heart started pounding, my hands went numb, and I felt dizzy. In the second before I spoke I was terrified. Terrified because I knew *exactly* what I was going to say.

> I'm nervous because I've never said this to a whole class before, but I feel like I have to tell you, to let you know why I'm saying what I say, that what I'm going to say means something to me very personally and isn't just some abstract speech about justice that addresses other people's lives but not my own.
>
> I'm a lesbian. I'm scared to tell you this, but I'm telling you. Being a lesbian means I'm up against a lot of flack in this society. Now, maybe things are easy for me. I don't have to say who I am. I'm a white woman. I was raised in a family that was well off. I have a nice job at a nice school. If I keep my mouth shut things are easy. I don't have to worry much about money, about how I'll take care of my children, about keeping my job. As long as I keep my mouth shut things are easy. But I can't do that, because every time I shut up, every time I let someone assume I'm straight, I die.
>
> I go to my mother in tears over a fight with a lover and before she can comfort me she has to tell me how my lover isn't my lover, how we're just 'special friends.' And what happens to me then? She's taking away my right to love, my right to feel things for the woman I love. When

> relatives and family friends ask if I have a boyfriend yet, they're killing me. They don't want me to exist unless I exist as a straight woman.
>
> And people do this to us all the time. They say, "I'll see part of you if you'll cut that other part off." They say, "I'll pretend to see you, if you promise not to be who you are." And when they do that, they're killing us. Whenever someone wants us to be someone we aren't, we have to say, *"No, this is who I am."* That's the only way we can stay alive. If they're going to kill us, let them kill us for being who we are. Don't kill yourselves for them.
>
> And I hear a lot of you talking about how it takes time. That's *their* line. Don't use it for them. Every time we've wanted anything, they've told us, "It takes time." That's what they told Martin Luther King, Jr. That's what they've told everyone who wanted to change things. Now, damn it, we may *know* it's going to take time, but we keep that to ourselves. We remind ourselves of it so we don't burn out when the fight drags on and on and on. We remind ourselves of it so we can keep fighting for years. But we don't say, "It takes time" We say, "*Now*!" They tell us, "It takes time," and we tell them "*NOW*," even if we know it's going to take years.

I stopped and tried to gather my breath, my eyes looking down at the desk I was sitting at. When I looked up, every student in the room was staring at me. And every one of them was smiling. Little smiles slowly turning into big, genuine smiles of relief and excitement. And then they started applauding.

The rest of Summer Bridge didn't get much easier. I still argued with myself about who I thought I was to try to give these students a politically significant education. But things changed a little. My students seemed to respect me more. I felt more and more comfortable with them as I realized they knew who I was and felt comfortable with me. When discussions grew stiff or moved too close to painful issues, sometimes I'd try to

connect them to my own life as a lesbian and that would inspire the students to reflect on their own lives more. It wasn't a perfect summer, but it was better than it would have been if I'd never come out. They knew I would take chances, they knew I'd make myself vulnerable to them, that I wasn't expecting them to bare their souls while I stayed fully armored at the front of the classroom.

In general, I try not to go off on a long, thoughtful tangent (read: jump into one of my speeches) unless other students have already spoken or unless they've asked directly what I think. Sometimes, though, I speak to fill a silence. Teachers aren't supposed to do this. We're supposed to be masters of waiting out the silence, but there can be painful or dangerous silences that I feel it's my duty to fill—they're not silences I want to send my students into alone and unarmed.

One of these silences occurred last winter. We'd been discussing the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the general effectiveness of the Civil Rights movement, and a white woman burst out, "You know, we were talking about this in one of my other classes and a *black* woman said she was sick and tired of hearing about King, that all people ever did was talk about him like he was a hero, and she didn't think he'd done anything. Everything was just as racist as it had ever been. How could she say something like that, especially when she's black?" Silence. No one answered. And I didn't feel right calling on anyone, for fear they'd miss the point or that it would raise issues they didn't feel comfortable diving into in front of twenty other people.

So I spoke, explaining that I approached the issue as a lesbian. I told my students how much the lives of gay people have changed in the last twenty years, what a blessing it was that I could be honest with them about my lesbianism without fearing reprisals. I explained that our state's sodomy laws had been repealed.

But then I explained how small, almost non-existent these changes could feel when I looked at everything that remained to be done. Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia still have sodomy laws; if I ever want to move, I have to consider this because the Supreme Court is willing to uphold these laws and who knows when someone might decide to use them against me.

I tried to explain how it feels to live in a society where everyone assumes you're straight. At least I have the women's sections in bookstores to turn to, so I don't have to satisfy myself with the rare gay characters that show up, usually very distorted and stereotypical, in "mainstream" writing. But, damn it, I want gay people, *real* gay people in mainstream writing too. I want my kids to find lesbian mothers in their school textbooks; I want them to see gay couples in MacDonald's commercials; I want them to grow up knowing the variety of sexual expression and seeing this variety wherever they look. I don't just want it to be safe to be gay, I want it to be normal.

I don't think I really talked that long, but a lot of frustration came out, a lot of sorrow, a lot of rage. I tried to explain how my invisible existence in a world where everyone's assumed straight made me conscious of how much society also assumes that everyone's white (and Christian, and middle or upper class). I explained how rare people of color were in the school textbooks I'd been taught with and talked about how I would feel if none of the faces of anyone who was held up as important looked like mine (which they didn't because all the "heroes" in the books were men), how important it is to *see ourselves*.

After class, Logan, who had been silent through most of our work together both in this class and in a class the previous quarter, walked me to my office. He sat down across from me and talked quietly and slowly for an hour. Talked about looking for black faces in the history books, about high school and the things he was realizing he'd "learned" about his race there, and the limitedness he was beginning to see in the education he was receiving here—the things he knew from black history that were appropriate to issues being covered in his classes, but that his teachers were ignorant of. He offered suggestions for my classes, a whole range of them, some relating to issues of diversity, others just things he thought it would be fun to try. And he told me that before I had talked in class that day he would never have considered sharing these thoughts with any of his teachers.

Since then, Logan and I have talked quite regularly. His determination to use his education to share black history and culture with others, to make the University *home* for himself and other black students, continues to teach me. His respect for me and his willingness to share his ideas and concerns with me have made me aware of a responsibility I welcome—the

responsibility to create a culturally diverse community in my classroom. If I ever get beyond my white, liberal, be-sure-to-cover-all-the-issues naivete, it will be at least in part because I spoke out as a lesbian and Logan was listening.

4. Coming Out Lets Us Create a Home at the University for Lesbian and Gay Students Who Might Otherwise Not Have One

When I was interviewed for my position at UC Santa Cruz, the director of writing explained that all composition courses were instructor-designed and asked me what sorts of classes I imagined I'd teach. At the time, my answer was vague—something about using lots of writing groups, I think. But after I left the interview my mind was reeling. During the next week I came up with ideas for nearly a dozen different courses. One of these was a course focusing on lesbian and gay issues.

Part of my motivation for teaching this course came from my own coming out years in college. I had wanted to be a part of my school's Lesbian Alliance, and did attend some of their meetings and work on some of their events. But I was acutely aware of not owning the 501 jeans and LaCoste t-shirts that everyone was looking so cool in, I felt shy around strangers, and I knew I couldn't dance well. So while I liked being around people who were *like* me, I also felt acutely aware of my *differences*. Being a lesbian wasn't enough to make me feel like one of them. In my class, I wanted to create a place where all lesbian and gay students could feel that they belonged, where all of us could come to be respected for being precisely who we were—nerd, stud, or anything in between.

The first day of teaching that class my stomach was knotted up from alternate bouts of excitement and fear. According to the class schedule, the course was simple Writing 63, Intermediate Expository Writing, a course required for many students hoping to transfer to other universities. I knew some students would have heard about the course content from me or their friends, others would have seen the texts in our University bookstore, but most would have no idea what to expect.

When I entered the classroom, which was designed to hold about twenty people, I found myself facing forty-five students.

What in the hell did I think I was doing, walking into this crowded room of strangers to announce that I was a lesbian and that this course would be dedicated to writing about lesbian and gay issues? Since no seats were left, I stood behind one of the few students I knew, Andrea, who had been in one of my classes a year earlier and who I'd worked out with regularly over the previous summer. I launched into a description of my own coming out experiences at college and ended by saying, "that's why I am teaching this class. If you aren't ready to commit yourself to ten weeks of writing and talking about lesbian and gay issues, feel free to leave." Eighteen students stayed.

Though these were the best times I've had at the University, they're also the hardest for me to write about. As a lesbian, I've had to learn the language for naming and fighting oppression; I've had far fewer opportunities to experience and describe articulately environments free from oppression. I've written and rewritten this section of my essay without being able to explain what it meant to me to be in a room where I was specifically valued for my lesbianism, where I didn't feel I was serving primarily as a "learning experience" for open-minded straight students. For many of my lesbian and gay students, this was the first class they'd had where they found themselves in the majority, where their experiences were considered the norm, where they could speak and write about their own lives without worrying about the response they were apt to get from presumably straight teachers and peers.

In that class, we made ourselves a home. This wasn't an easy task, and the common ground many of us shared didn't guarantee success. Most of the straight students were uncomfortable at first, afraid that they had nothing to say, nothing to contribute to our work together. There were tensions among some of the gay students—was it safe to come out? Would someone's privacy be violated? Students who hung out with different groups were initially nervous about trusting one another.

But as the quarter progressed, these tensions faded. Our class meetings were often loud and laughter-filled. We faced issues in discussions that most of us had never had the courage to share with a group before: rape and incest survival, recovery from self-mutilation—old scars that bled at the naming, but that, after the bleeding, healed.

Over and over again, I caught myself drifting off into a trance of sorts, overwhelmed by the miracle of the nineteen of us, gathered together at the University, exploring and writing about the central issues of our lives. The students were getting academic credit for taking the course; I was being paid to teach it!

I miss our class. Before teaching it, I'd always felt pleased with myself for finding one of the few "oppression free" jobs in existence. The fact that I could name myself, be honest about myself in the workplace was misleading. I *do* have a lot of freedom, but now I also have a clearer picture of how far we have left to go, even in the best of circumstances. I've lost a home. Nowhere else at the University feels the same. I'm more sensitive to how much the readings in other courses I teach leave out, how much the heterosexual reality they present works against my honesty. I'm realizing that I can't assume my reality is a part of the university's reality, that I have to insist that it be included. Increasingly, I just plain feel left out. But feeling these contradictions is a first step toward changing them.

The students I've talked to since then miss it too. The course won't be offered again for at least two years, when a colleague of mine will teach it—so I won't have it again for another four years. But I expect all of us will keep the benefits of that home we created. I see those students in my office, meet them for tea on weekends. They have the friendships they made with each other. We hope to produce an anthology of our best writing from that quarter, so other teachers can see what happens when gay students have the opportunity to write honestly about their lives. We own the University in a way none of us did before we worked together.

In my fantasies, we could present these reasons for coming out to every principal, chairperson, and PTA in the country. We explain the benefits our honesty has for our students and people get it. *Our students and their parents start saying, "We want our gay teachers to be open. We expect it. Because we want the best education we can have." Gay teachers can put their full energy into their teaching instead of into hiding. Students with gay family members no longer feel they have anything to hide.*

Our classrooms become communities where diversity is prized. And lesbian and gay children grow up being proud to be who they are, knowing that some of the most respected figures in their lives share their identity.

Besides teaching, I get carried away and overcommitted with publishing projects with Irene. I occasionally remember to weed my garden. I work on my Spanish. I spoil my cat. And I give constant thanks for the dear friends who help keep this workaholic woman sane.

Love, Politics, and "Rescue" in Lesbian Relationships is the second volume in the HerBooks Lesbian-Feminist Essay Series. HerBooks welcomes additional manuscripts for the series. We are looking for original, personal, passionate, and persuasive essays by and about lesbians intended to inspire dialogue among lesbians. Writing should be non-scholarly, non-rhetorical, and accessible; essays which combine poetry and narrative with research are welcome. A few possible topics: how thin lesbians can be allies of fat lesbians, Jewish lesbians, lesbians surviving self-mutilation, sexuality, lesbian teachers, lesbian ethics and politics. . . Proposals are welcome. Manuscripts should be no longer than 40 typed pages. Send SASE.

The Lesbian in Front of the Classroom
Writings by Lesbian Teachers

A few years ago I came half asleep to school on a Monday morning. A boy came up and said, "I saw you at the beach this weekend. Were you with a girl or a boy?" I said that I was there with a woman. At 7:45 in the morning I get told, "Well she sure did look like a dyke to me." I think to myself—yes—my girlfriend does look like a dyke—but I don't dare respond to his observation or challenge *his* use of the term "dyke."

—Anza Stein

I never really decided to start coming out. Instead, coming out just seemed a natural part of my developing teaching style, the increasingly honest and passionate bonds I was forging with my students. Coming out was part of my way of demonstrating the commitment we'd made to one another.

—Sarah-Hope Parmeter

The facts/debates/politics of lesbian and gay experience must not only be allowed to enter the institution of the school but must be allowed to *change* that institution. Until then, the lesbian/gay teacher remains embattled, until her strength or optimism runs out. The politics of fairness are a revolutionary politics. They are the same politics which provide the impetus for challenging racism, the existing class structure, and oppressive attitudes towards disability. This is a vision of a fair world.

—Caroline Sidaway

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