

*Essay Winner 2007 (Second Place)*

*A Feminist Invitation: A Painted Response to Feminist Invitations*

**by Carolyn Hill**

In her poem Feminist Invitations[1], Kristen Warder invites the reader to reflect on the feeling of “otherness” which places her outside the heterosexual norm and on the source of anger which infuses its expression. In particular, the offer is made to explore the feeling of alienation of the lesbian poet within a classroom of feminists. The poem invites the reader to consider the need for inclusive content in feminist pedagogy and to reflect on how anger can be transformed to facilitate mutual respect amongst all women. To respond to the invitation, the reader must recognize that the expression of anger is a tool to energize effective change in the institutions and assumptions which underline our daily experience.

My painting responds to the issue of content in feminist pedagogy by the use of metaphors to trace the development of a body of feminist thought and study. In addition, the painting records my initial personal response to the poem. In identifying the anger which informed this response, I have been afforded an opportunity to use that information and energy[2] to express the place and time in which I find myself as a woman and as an advocate for feminism.

In order to relate the ways in which Warder’s poem informed my painting, it is helpful to review the message of Warder’s poem and the tools with which her meaning is conveyed.

Warder begins her poem by identifying the source of her anger: “there have been some complaints about the lesbian content in this class”. The messenger is identified only as “she”, a term both specific in its gender and vague enough to be an “any/every” woman designation; possibly a representative of the teaching academy. In the course of the six separate stanzas, Warder then elaborates on her response to this message.

In the second stanza, the poet uses the metaphor of “Eyes”: “Eyes peering embarrassed for me for Themselves”. Both the capitalization and the image bring to mind the “dominant gaze” which regulates and defines our behaviour and identity[3]. The play on the word “I”s, the plural form of “I”, emphasizes the way that Warder is reconstructing the heterosexual practice of language in poetry, where “I” assumes a heterosexual bias. This emphasis through word play makes the assumption recognized and explicit.[4] In the same stanza she states her position: “I Refuse”. The double meaning of “refuse” in this assertion serves to state a categorical refusal to hide her response and a setting apart of her position as refuse, that is, abject or outside the accepted norm.[5] The visual cues of word fragmentation, irregular lines and patterns serve to demonstrate the fragile nature of her condition, her multiple selves, “cra ckin g” to the point of breaking. In this stanza, Warder makes reference to the uselessness of guilt as a response to anger, a theme consistent with the works of Audre Lord, one of her named “top Ten Feminists” (166). Audre Lord has written extensively about the use of anger transformed from silence into language as a tool to communicate across differences and gain understanding between peers. Neither the lack of ability to identify with the experience of being oppressed in a certain way, nor the retreat into guilt is condoned by Lorde as an appropriate audience response. Rather, she exhorts her audience to listen to

and recognize the differences in contexts and living experiences of women and others marginalized by race, class, and sexual orientation (128). This is behind Warder's statement that: "...exile can never be rectified by guilt."

In the third stanza, Warder builds on her position outside the world that does has forced her to withdraw and voices her lack of identification with "this world". She feels pride in finding herself outside the norm. In this way her identity as "other" is established. The binary of the "normal" and "not normal" is reiterated. She is defined by what she is not[6]. In this stanza, she makes specific reference to the title of her poem: Feminist Invitations. She refers to "this class full of feminist invitations to pretend" (ie. everyone is part of the heterosexual norm).

The fourth stanza is used to describe how the "norm" is perceived from her outsider position. While still not complaining, she identifies the compulsory heterosexual assumptions which underlie the images and language she confronts everywhere. The relentlessness of this message is emphasized by the run-on list of sources and phenomena where heterosexuality is assumed as the "norm". She has not complained about this assumption because she does not want to condemn it: "because love is something to celebrate", but she adds in the same phrase "and not just Your love". The capitalization of the possessive pronoun serves to emphasize again the dominance of the presumption of heterosexuality in the institutional patriarchy of her daily experience[7].

The fifth stanza is a transition in the poem where the reader and the "You" of the poem is addressed in capital letters. The anger of Warder's experience as an "outsider" is unleashed. She demands to become visible, for her identity to be recognized. She

concedes that the “Eyes” have recognized her but not as anything other than an aberration of the norm. In a list of expressions of intolerance and ignorance, she relates the misunderstanding she, as a lesbian, has endured. Wistfully she allows for hope that it might be different “Someday”.

The sixth stanza asks for support from someone. This person is a particular individual (the ‘you’ hiding at the back of the class in a dress) but it is possibly the reader. In any event the “you” is not capitalized and is therefore neither threatening nor part of the “Your” world. The expression of anger is fully dissipated and the tone of the last stanza is of resignation and grief. There is opportunity for the reader to respond to the questions posed in the first lines:

“Oh this has been one of those days  
when i need to know  
where am i are we are you”

These questions hang as she leaves open the one line gap before the last line. The final word is “silent”.

It was into this vacuum that I found an opportunity to paint a response[8]. I found myself echoing Warder’s question: “where am i?”

The painting is mostly collage, as a metaphor for the way in which things are cut out of experience and given special meaning. In particular, this is the case for the selection of subjects for study in academia. Given that universities were first founded to

school the sons of gentlemen, there has been historically an inherent patriarchal and heterosexual bias in the selection of subjects for study. Women's Studies by definition resist this founding model. The black lower third of the painting is representative of a blackboard, the classic template for teaching. It is on this template that the collage has been assembled.

At first, the poem triggered a response of anger. Warder's ranting list of cultural phenomena in the fourth stanza touched a nerve, particularly the opening word "minivans". I have been a "minivan mom" and in identifying with this term on the first reading, I felt maligned and misunderstood as a member of the "Your" world articulated by Warder. When she set up the binary, I felt that she had made assumptions about my attitudes and behaviours. She seemed to be making the same kinds of universalizing claims that she resists. My initial thought was: "It's not just a piece of cake you know!" The image of a white cake accompanied this thought. The initial anger was muted by further understanding of the poem. Warder does not attack the integrity of the individual audience/reader. The object of the critique is much broader and encompasses homophobia, feminist pedagogy and more generally, the patriarchal heterosexuality assumed in media representations, institutions and the practices of our daily lives. It is these assumptions which have angered and continue to anger me.

I kept the image and used the cake as a metaphor for my identity in the central part of the painting. The cake is three-dimensional, pink and fleshy; it is rich and the icing is white. It conforms to the ideal appearance of "a white cake". The cherry on top and the shape of the missing slice suggest female sexuality. As a woman of the white

upper middle class, I have enjoyed many inherited benefits due in a large part to the efforts of many people of lower economic standing who work to provide goods and services. The cake has been resting on a cake pedestal which is brown and very plain. The “majority” world which supports the lifestyle I enjoy is largely brown and/or poor.

The upper two thirds of the board are covered in yellow wallpaper which has been designed with a pattern of lovebirds nesting around a heart. This is a direct reference to Gilman’s The Yellow Wallpaper[9]. It is meant to reflect the assumptions of a woman’s place and role so powerfully resisted in both Gilman’s story and Warder’s poem. For me, assumptions about being contained and accommodating, flexible and nurturing as a wife and mother have on occasion made me feel angry and limited. That I conform to expectations and feel stifled is represented by the cake safe which is meant to bring to mind a bell jar[10]. A bell jar is used to preserve its contents by keeping the air out. Inside there is silence and a vacuum. In the painting, the cake and the cake safe are toppling as are all the objects represented. Everything is destabilized. Air is flowing and energy is unleashed.

The other objects on the board are selected as a response to the nursery rhyme question: “What are Little Girls Made of?” The answer in the rhyme suggests that: “Sugar and Spice and Everything Nice, That’s What Little Girls are Made of!” This rhyme popped into my head as I was thinking about the cake metaphor and provided a good vehicle for representing some aspects of the evolution of Feminism/Women’s Studies into the postmodernist world[11]. The tearing down of the paper represents the challenge to regulatory practices and attitudes in patriarchal discursive systems. It invites

us to rethink and to fully experience our selves as women and people of compassion. This stripping allows for an appreciation of similar themes in striving for full personhood in different contexts[12]. The only word of the nursery rhyme which is not included on the board is “Nice”. Its conspicuous absence emphasizes the anger I experience from the expectation to be, amongst other traits, “nice”. The metaphors from the rhyme speak to various aspects of the evolution of feminist thought.

The Sugar tin is regularly shaped, and is virginal blue. The label is neatly adorned with diamonds. It represents educated women of the middle class who were the driving force of Liberal Feminism demanding equal opportunity for women within the patriarchal system in the public sphere.

The Spice jar is curvy and cut out of animal skin. It is exotic and primal. The red label suggests something vital and sexy. In addition to providing the polar stereotype of “woman as virgin”, the jar is also meant to represent the rise of consciousness of women of Colour. That racism, class and sexism are interlocking oppressions in the experience of women was revealed by Women of Colour and Black scholars and taken up by and reconfigured by Marxist, Socialist and Radical Feminists. The oppressions of women in the both the public and the private realm, and issues of domestic violence, class, sexual orientation, social and economic justice, and ability became parts of the rising consciousness.

Finally, the lavender[13] coloured jar of “&”s on the canvas represents the problem with the categorization of listed identities which divide the interests of women. The “Problem of the Ampersand”[14] is that, by creating potential hierarchies of

oppression and exclusivity in naming the experiences of identified groups of women, there is no common ground. The jar is spilling and the “&”s are overlapping to signify that definitions of identity can be fluid, unfixed and overlapping. Issues are open, fluid and interconnected. Identity categories are, however, necessary tools for allowing for spaces of resistance. (Butler, 118). Within the women’s movement, anger between women needs to be articulated with precision to facilitate learning outside one’s comfort zone. Audre Lord spoke to this proposition and concluded that:

“the strength between women lies in recognizing the differences between us as creative and in standing to those distortions which we inherited without blame, but which are now ours to alter. The angers of women can transform difference through insight into power. For anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal but a sign of growth.”(131)

Feminist pedagogy that is inclusive allows for all women to feel there is an opportunity to be heard as they struggle to be empowered. Differences can and should be articulated and respected.

The painting is framed by a mirror coloured border of eyes. This is meant to play on the reference to the “Eyes” in Warder’s poem. They look at all of us all of the time. There is also the opportunity for the viewer of the painting to see herself in the small mirror atop the bell jar. By examining our reflections we ask “where am i” and attempt to unite our outward self with our inner experienced self.

The cake is the only three-dimensional representation in my painting. The rest of the collage is made up of two-dimensional representations. The only other three-



dimensional aspect is the physical lifting of the wallpaper exposing the word behind on the template of the painting. This is meant to provide an invitation for the audience to be involved with the painting and to continue the unfinished stripping of the paper to expose the board underneath. The word that is partially exposed is meant to convey the possibility of transformation. Anger can be expressed. “Everything” is possible. The board is natural and unbounded. The word is written in red: the colour of anger, of blood, and of transformation. The silence which contains anger is given voice in this word. The vacuum at the end of Warder’s poem can be filled. The title of the painting “A Feminist Invitation” borrows from the title of Warder’s poem. The invitation is extended.

“Everything”/ “Someday”.

End Notes

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[1] Kristen Warder, “Feminist Invitations,” *Turbo Chicks Talking Young Feminisms*, ed. Allyson Mitchell, Lisa Bryn Rundle, Lara Karaian (Toronto: Sumac Press, 2001) 162-166. Please see Appendix I for the full text.

[2] One of Warder’s list of “Top Ten Feminists” is Audre Lorde. I have adopted Lorde’s phrase. In Lorde’s experience, the anger which fuels the expression of experiences of oppression is “loaded with information and energy” (127). Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism (1981)” *Sister Outsider Essays and Speeches*. (California: The Crossing Press 1984) 124-133.

[3] This concept is explored fully in Sandra Lee Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” *Reading Women’s Lives*, ed. K.J. Verwaayen (Boston: Pearson, 2005) 87-113. “In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male

connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand before his gaze and under his judgement.” (99).

[4] Liz Yorke, “Constructing a Lesbian Poetic for Survival: Broumas, Rukeseyer, H.D., Rich, Lorde” *Sexual Sameness textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing* ed. Joseph Bristow. (London: Routledge 1992) 187-209. York discusses the use of pronouns as neutral terms in the context of classical lyrical poetry where masculinist/heterosexual bias goes unrecognized. The need to resignify differences in gender specific language is one technique used to challenge heterosexual patriarchal discursive systems.

[5] Adrienne Rich’s poem “Splittings (1974)” provides a similar use of the phrase “I refuse”. Yorke (198)

[6] In this way the poets self “othering” typifies the problem discussed by Judith Butler in “Intimation and Gender Insubordination,” *Women’s Studies 020E*, ed. K.J. Verwaayen (theBookStore at western, M8244, Sept. 2006) 117-122. “...identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression.” (118). The declaration of “other-ness” , in this case lesbian, “is a process that reinscribes the power domain it resists, [ ] it is constituted by the very heterosexual matrix that it seeks to displace...”(120).

[7] Adrienne Rich, one of Warder’s named Top Ten Feminists, challenged the presumption of heterosexuality in institutional patriarchy in her landmark article “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980) Foreword (1983)” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*. ed .Barbara Charlesworth (New York: Norton 1993) 203-224. Her recognition of and challenge to this presumption provided a revelation that has had lasting resonance. In particular, Rich made observations about the inequality of power between men and women and between heterosexuals and homosexuals.

[8] Please see Appendix II for a copy of the painting “A Feminist Invitation” (Collage and Acrylic on board 2’X 3’ , 2007 C.R. Hill)

[9] Charlotte Perkins Gilman “The Yellow Wallpaper (1892)” *Reading Women’s Lives*, ed. K.J. Verwaayen

(Boston: Pearson, 2005) 243-260

[10] This is a direct reference to the title of Sylvia Plath’s 1963 novel “*The Bell Jar*” London England: Faber, 2005. Her novel is of a woman struggling with the expectations of her mother to settle down to a good marriage, the desire to write and the breakdown of wellbeing between these two options. It is similar to Gilman’s piece in that it uses subversion to resist heterosexist and patriarchal discourses.

[11] The development of feminist theory is treated with a very broad brush in this paper. bell hooks summarizes the development in “Feminist Class Struggle (2000)” *Reading Women’s Lives*, ed. K.J. Verwaayen (Boston: Pearson, 2005) 355-362

[12] “As we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule over our lives and form silences begin to lose their control over us.” Audre Lorde “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”

*Sister Outsider Essays and Speeches*. (California: The Crossing Press 1984) 36-39 (36)

[13] Lavender is chosen to reflect lesbianism, a descriptor with which Kristen Warder identifies.

[14] An expression attributed to Judith Butler in lecture. (K.J. Verwaayen October 10/06 Women’s Studies 020E Section 001, U.W.O.)

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