

# SISTER OUTSIDERS

BY AUDRE LORDE

I walked down those three little steps into the Bagatelle on a weekend night in 1956. There was an inner door, guarded by a male bouncer, ostensibly to keep out the straight male intruders come to gawk at the "lezzies," but in reality to keep out those women deemed "undesirable." All too frequently, undesirable meant Black.

Women stood three-deep around the bar and between the tables, and in the doorway to the postage-stamp-sized dance floor. By 9:00 p.m. the floor was packed solid with women's bodies moving slowly to the jukebox beat of Ruth Brown's "When your friends have left you all alone / and you have no one to call your own . . ." or Frank Sinatra's "Set 'em up, Joe / I got a little story . . ."

When I moved through the bunches of women cruising each other in the front room, or doing a slow fish on the dance floor in the back, with the smells of cigarette smoke and the music and the hair pomade whirling together like incense through charged air, it was hard for me to believe that my being an outsider had anything to do with being a lesbian.

But when I, a Black woman, saw no reflection in any of the faces there week after week, I knew perfectly well that being an outsider in the Bagatelle had everything to do with being Black.

The society within the confines of the Bagatelle reflected the ripples and eddies of the larger society that had spawned it, and which allowed the Bagatelle to survive as long as it did, selling watered-down drinks at inflated prices to lonely dykes who had no other social outlet or community gathering place.

Rather than the idyllic picture created by false nostalgia, the fifties were really straight white America's cooling-off period of "let's pretend we're happy and that this is the best of all possible worlds and we'll blow those nasty commies to hell if they dare to say otherwise."

The Rosenbergs had been executed, the transistor radio had been invented, and frontal lobotomy was the standard solution for persistent deviation. For some, Elvis Presley and his stolen Black rhythms became arch-symbols of the antichrist.

Young America's growing pains, within the Bagatelle, were represented by the fashion conflicts between the blue-jeans set and the Bermuda-shorts set. Then, of course, there were those who fell in between, both by virtue of our art or our craziness or our color.

The breakdown into the mommies and daddies was an important part of lesbian relationships in the Bagatelle. If you asked the wrong woman to dance, you could get your nose broken in the alley down the street by her butch, who had followed you out of the Bag for exactly that purpose. It was safer to keep to yourself. And you were never supposed to ask who was who, which is why there was such heavy emphasis on correct garb. The well-dressed gay-girl was supposed to give you enough clues for you to know.

For some of us, however, the role-playing reflected all the depreciating attitudes toward women which we loathed in straight society. It was a rejection of these roles that had drawn us to "the life" in the first place. Instinctively, without particular theory or political position or dialectic, we recognized oppression as oppression, no matter where it came from.

But those lesbians who had carved some niche in the pretend world of dominance/subordination rejected what they called our "confused" life style, and they were in the majority.

Felicia was so late one Sunday afternoon for our photography lesson that Muriel and I went off to Laurel's without her, because you had to be early on Sundays to get something to eat. The Swing Rendezvous had closed its table, but at Laurel's on Sunday afternoon there was free brunch with any drink, and that meant all you could eat. Many of the gay bars used this to get Sunday afternoon business at a traditionally slow time, but Laurel's had the best food. There was a Chinese cook there of no mean talent. He cooked back and kept it coming. After the word got around, every Sunday afternoon at four o'clock there would be a line of gay-girls in front of Laurel's, smoking and talking and trying to pretend we had all arrived there at that time by accident.

When the doors opened, there was a discreet but determined stampede, first to the bar and then to the food table, set up in the rear of the lounge. We tried to keep our cool, pretending that we couldn't care less for barbecued spare ribs with peach and apricot sweet sauce, or succulent pink shrimp swimming in thick golden lobster sauce, dotted with bits of green scallion and bright yellow egg drops, tiny pieces of pork and onion afloat on

This piece is excerpted from Audre Lorde's new work of fiction, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Persephone Press). Audre Lorde teaches poetry at Hunter College. Her other recent book is *Chosen Poems—Old and New* (Norton).

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top. There were stacked piles of crispy brown egg rolls filled with shredded ham and chicken and celery, rolled together and fried with a touch of sesame paste. There were fried chicken bits, and every once in a great while, a special delicacy such as lobster or fresh crab. Only the first lucky few got to taste those special dishes, so it was worthwhile being first on line and pushing your cool image a little bit askew.

We were healthy young female animals mercifully more alive than most of our peers, robust and active women, and our blood was always high and our pockets empty and a free meal in convivial surroundings—meaning around other lesbians—was a big treat for most of us, even if purchased at the price of a bottle of beer, which was fifty cents, with many complaints.

Dancing wasn't allowed at Laurel's so it never got to be as popular as the Bag, except on Sunday afternoons. Muriel preferred it because it was always quieter. Trix ran the place, and always had a hand for "her girls." Tiny and tough, with a permanent Florida tan and a Bronx accent, she took a shine to Muriel and me, and sometimes she would buy us a beer, and sit down and talk with us if the place wasn't too crowded.

We all knew the situation with gay bars, how they came in and out of existence with such regularity and who really profited from them. But Trix was pretty and bright and hard and kind all at the same time, and her permanent tan particularly endeared her to me. She looked like one of the nicer of the hickory-skinned devils who used to people my dreams of that period.

Actually, the lifespan of most gay bars was under a year, with the notable exception of a few like the Bag. Laurel's went the way of all the other gay bars—like the Swing and Snooky's and the Grapevine, the Sea Colony and the Pony Stable Inn. Each closed after a year or so, while another opened and caught on somewhere else. But for that year, Laurel's served as an important place for those of us who met and made some brief space for ourselves there. It had a feeling of family.

On summer Sunday afternoons, Muriel and I would split from the gay beach at Coney Island or Riis Park early, take the subway back home in time to wash up and dress and saunter over to Laurel's in time for the food at 4:00. I had my first open color confrontation with a gay-girl one Sunday afternoon in Laurel's.

Muriel and I had come back that day from Riis Park, full of sun and sand. We loved with the salt still on our skins, then bathed, washed our hair, and got ready to go out. I put on my faded cord riding britches with the suede crotch, and a pale blue short-sleeved sweatshirt bought earlier that week at John's on Avenue C for sixty-nine cents. My skin was tanned from the sun and burnished ruddy with the heat and much loving. My hair was newly trimmed and freshly washed, with the particular crispness that it always develops in sustained summer heat. I felt raunchy and restless.

We walked out of the hot August afternoon sun into the suddenly dark coolness of Laurel's downstairs. There was Muriel, in her black Bermuda shorts and shirt, ghost pale, her eternal cigarette in hand. And I was beside her, full of myself, knowing I was fat and Black and very fine. We were without peer or category, and on that day I was conscious of being very proud of it, no matter who looked down her nose at us.

After Muriel and I had gotten our food and beer and copped one of the tables, Dottie and Pauli came over. We saw them a lot at the Bag and in the supermarket over on Avenue D, but we'd never been to their house nor they to ours, except for New Year's food, when everyone came.

"Where you guys been?" Pauli had an ingenuous smile, her blonde hair and blue eyes incandescent against the turquoise mandarin shirt she wore.

"Riis. Gay Beach." Muriel's finger crooked over the bottle as she took a slug. All of us eschewed glasses as faggy, although I sometimes longed for one because the cold beer hurt my teeth.

Pauli turned to me. "Hey, that's a great tan you have there. I didn't know Negroes got tans." Her broad smile was intended to announce the remark as a joke.

My usual defense in such situations was to ignore the overtones, to let it go. But Dottie Daws, probably out of her own nervousness at Pauli's reference to the unmentionable, would not let the matter drop. Raved on and on about my great tan. Matched her arm to mine. Shook her pale blonde head, telling whomever would listen that she wished she could tan like that instead of burning, and did I know how lucky I was to be able to get such a tan like that? I grew tired and then shakily furious, having enough of whatever it was.

"How come you never make so much over my natural tan most days, Dottie Daws; how come?"

There was a moment of silence at the table, punctuated only by Muriel's darkly appreciative chuckle, and then we moved on to something else,

mercifully. I was still shaking inside. I never forgot it.

In the gay bars, I longed for other Black women without the need ever taking shape on my lips. For four hundred years in this country, Black women have been taught to view each other with deep suspicion. It was no different in the gay world.

Most Black lesbians were closeted, correctly recognizing the Black community's lack of interest in our position, as well as the many more immediate threats to our survival as Black people in a racist society. It was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female, to be Black, female, and gay. To be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet, even to the extent of dancing in the Bagatelle, was considered by many Black lesbians to be simply suicidal. And if you were fool enough to do it, you'd better come on so tough that nobody messed with you. I often felt put down by their sophistication, their clothes, their manners, their cars, and their femmes.

The Black women I usually saw around the Bag were into heavy roles, and it frightened me. This was partly the fear of my own Blackness mirrored, and partly the realities of the masquerade. These women felt to me like parts of my own sexual self I had not yet come to terms with. They seemed tough in a way I felt I could never be. Even if they were not, their self-protective instincts warned them to appear that way. By white America's racist distortions of beauty, Black women playing "femme" had very little chance in the Bag. There was constant competition among butches to have the most "gorgeous femme" on their arm. And "gorgeous" was defined by a white male world's standards.

For me, going into the Bag was like entering an anomalous no-woman's land. I wasn't cute or passive enough to be "femme," and I wasn't mean or tough enough to be "butch." I was given a wide berth. Nonconventional people can be dangerous, even in the gay community.

With the exception of Felicia and myself, the other Black women in the Bag came protected by a show of all the power symbols they could muster. Whatever else they did during the week, on Friday nights when Lion or Trip appeared, sometimes with expensively dressed women on their arms, sometimes alone, they commanded attention and admiration. They were well-heeled, superbly dressed, self-controlled high-steppers who drove convertibles, bought rounds of drinks for their friends, and generally took care of business.

But sometimes, even they couldn't get in unless they were recognized by the bouncer.

My friends and I were the hippies of the gay-girl circuit, before the word was coined. Many of us wound up dead or demented, and many of us were distorted by the many fronts we had to fight upon. But when we survived, we grew up strong.

Every Black woman I ever met in the Village in those years had some part in my survival, large or small, if only as a figure in the head-count at the Bag on a Friday night.

Black lesbians in the Bagatelle faced a world only slightly less hostile than the outer world which we had to deal with every day on the outside—that world which defined us as doubly nothing because we were Black and because we were Women—that world which raised our blood pressures and shaped our furies and our nightmares.

The temporary integration of war plants and the egalitarian myth of Rosie the Riveter had ended abruptly with the end of World War II and the

wholesale return of the American woman to the role of little wifey. So far as I could see, gay-girls were the only Black and white women who were even talking to each other in this country in the 1950s, outside of the empty rhetoric of patriotism and political movements.

Black or white, Ky-Ky, butch, or femme, the only thing we shared, often, and in varying proportions, was that we dared for connection in the name of woman, and saw that as our power, rather than our problem.

All of us who survived those common years had to be a little strange. We spent so much of our young womanhood trying to define ourselves as woman-identified women before we even knew the words existed, let alone that there were ears interested in trying to hear them beyond our immediate borders. All of us who survived those common years have to be a little proud. A lot proud. Keeping ourselves together and on our own tracks, however wobbly, was like trying to play the Dinizulu War Chant or a Beethoven sonata on a tin dog-whistle.

The important message seemed to be that you had to have a place. Whether or not it did justice to whatever you felt you were about, there had to be some place to refuel and check your flaps.

In times of need and great instability, the place sometimes became more a definition than the substance of why you needed it to begin with. Sometimes the retreat became the reality. The writers who posed in cafes talking their work to death without writing two words; the lesbians, virile as men, hating women and their own womanhood with a vengeance. The bars and the coffee shops and the streets of the Village in the 1950s were full of nonconformists who were deathly afraid of going against their hard-won group, and so eventually they were broken between the group and their individual needs.

For some of us there was no one particular place, and we grabbed whatever we could from wherever we found space, comfort, quiet, a smile, nonjudgment.

Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different.

Each of us had our own needs and pursuits, and many different alliances. Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self. At the Bag, at Hunter College, uptown in Harlem at the library, there was a piece of the real me bound in each place, and growing.

It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference. (And often, we were cowards in our learning.) It was years before we learned to use the strength that daily surviving can bring, years before we learned that fear does not have to incapacitate, and that we could appreciate each other on terms not necessarily our own.

The Black gay-girls in the Village gay bars of the fifties knew each other's names, but we seldom looked into each other's Black eyes, lest we see our own aloneness and our own blunted power mirrored in the pursuit of darkness. Some of us died inside the gaps between the mirrors and those turned-away eyes.



Instances of violence by the Ku Klux Klan have been on the upsurge throughout the country. In April 1980 four Black women were simply shot down, without provocation, by Klansmen in Chattanooga, Tennessee; a fifth woman was injured by flying glass. Only in February 1982 were these women awarded damages (the three Klansmen had been acquitted by an all-white jury in July 1980). According to the National Anti-Klan Network, "Since April 1980, scores of people have been targets of harassment, attempted bombings, stonings and shootings by the Nazis, Klansmen and their imitators.... Victims most often have been Black people or other people of color—but other targets include synagogues, union members and women's rights offices. During this same period, the U.S. Department of Justice consistently has refused to intervene against right-wing violence utilizing the existing civil rights and anti-Klan statutes." For more on what you can do to fight the Klan, write: National Anti-Klan Network, P.O. Box 10500, Atlanta, Ga. 30310.

Photograph on left by Helen Koba. Girls in Patterson, N.J. 1980. Helen Koba, who lives in Portland, Oregon, has been taking pictures of people for the last five years.