

The Politics of Feminist Writing Workshop

Ann Finger, moderator, Women's Writers Union

Gabrielle Daniels, Black Left feminist, author of *Movement in 11 Days*

Margo Rivera, Latina Jewish lesbian, WWU, Mongrel Women (an organization of women of mixed heritage)

GABRIELLE DANIELS: Preparing this talk I realized how little I knew about Black women's history. A lot has been obscured and hasn't been analysed. I'm in the process of bringing together ideas I've gotten being with the WWU for a year. The WWU helped me in my continuing definition of how I am as a Black poet and feminist writer.

I want to start with two poems by June Jordan. In "Poem for South African Women," which was presented before the UN in August, 1978, she writes:

And the babies cease alarm as mothers/raising arms/and heart high as the stars so far unsee/nevertheless
hurl into the universe/a moving force/irreversible as light years/traveling to the open/eye/And who will join this
standing up/and the ones who stood without sweet company/will sing and sing/back into the mountains
and/if necessary/even under the sea/we are the ones we have been waiting for

This is about being unified with a lot of women to fight apartheid. It's also about definitions, how other people see you. In "A Short Note to My Very Critical and Well-Beloved Friends and Comrades" Jordan writes:

First they said I was too light! Then they said I was too dark! Then they said I was too different! Then
they said I was too much the same! Then they said I was too young! Then they said I was too old! Then
they said I was too interracial! Then they said I was too much a nationalist! Then they said I was too silly!
Then they said I was too angry! Then they said I was too idealistic! Then they said I was too confusing
altogether! Make up your mind! They said. Are you militant/ or sweet? Are you vegetarian or meat? Are
you straight or are you gay? And I said, Hey! It's not about my mind.

I wanted to read this because it indicates how good I feel to see the diversity of people at this conference. (applause)

"Tell it like it is," that old Black English phrase. Once a soul song on the radio, it means to testify, to get a load off one's chest, to share one's truth with the world. When I think of women writing, I think of women testifying about their lives as lesbians, women of color, working women, mothers, daughters, sisters. What immediately comes to my mind are the Black women writers I admire: Linda Brent, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Lucille Clifton, Lorraine Hansberry. Their words are with us because people of color—and white people—refused to let them fade.

There hasn't always been an opportunity to read works by women of color. In some bookstores I still see their books in the "race" section separated from the "women's" section. Such sidestepping parallels the thoughts of some white feminists (who) believed the rhetoric of Black Power Movement spokeswomen who wanted to live their freedom through their men. "We are already liberated," was the slogan. But one of the main objections Black feminists voiced about *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* by Michelle Wallace was that the history of Black women seemed to begin and end with the Black Power Movement. This left out the achievements of Black women up to and including the much put-down Civil Rights Movement. Finally, the written experience of Black women living "on the edge" scared some white feminists, readers and editors alike. They didn't want to face up to their own racism and class privilege. The strength and urgency of Black women's arguments against their oppression and for the end of capitalism convinced them that Black women couldn't be taken for granted.

There was, and continues to be, a divergence of views among Black feminist writers. We don't espouse the same politics or have the same agendas for (fighting) what oppresses us but we do have agendas. Our politics is mirrored in what we write and read. Who I read contributes to my self-realization and perspective as a Black feminist writer/poet, from the most conservative to the most radical. I need them. I need their ideas.

You've probably seen special issues in feminist magazines and newspapers on women of color. Zora Neale Hurston is the subject of a biography and her books are being reissued, thanks to



Gabrielle Daniels

the efforts of Alice Walker. But it isn't enough to have special issues. Women of color who write should be in each and every feminist newspaper or journal, and not as tokens.

I could say that Black women writers may be scared to lay themselves in front of an audience, a workshop, other women of color, other white women. There are many examples of this but this observation is too pat. There are Black women writers who are out yet who continue to be invisible. The characterization of women of color in literature continues to be minimal, based on hearsay and stereotype.

"Space limitations," some magazine editors say. "We get so many submissions we have to dump our files every few months." But I see more reasons for the lack of writing by women of color being published and disseminated in the feminist community: sidestepping, distortion, self-bellitting, fear. These are convenient reasons for censorship. It continues at an alarming rate. More and more I've heard stories of lesbians excluded from publication by their own people. More and more I've heard it's not fair to criticize well-known feminists for their separatism, homophobia, class privilege and even their woman-hatred, because such criticism "divides." After a reading I gave last December at Old Wives' Tales, a group of women wrote a letter to *Plexus*, a Bay Area feminist newspaper, objecting to the discussion I initiated over racism between women of color. They said WWU members were disrespectful of the collective pain of Black women in the audience. Such censorship is deadly. It could kill us all. There were blacklists (in the McCarthy era) and I believe there are blacklists now of women writers who offend too many sensitivities around race, sex and class. Zora Neale Hurston, Agnes Smedley, Meridel Le Sueur, Paul Robeson and Richard Wright were on such lists when this country needed their voices heard. It has taken nearly 20 years for some writers to get work or get published.

The so-called intelligentsia and academics criticize the spontaneity and reality of our words. The politics I see being applied (is) a constant recycling of writers that sound, think and write the same. The academics are afraid of change, afraid of the power of words to change, afraid of getting down to what it is to live different in America. They castigate us as too personal, too loud, too strident, too political. And our sisters (sometimes) slap us for the same reasons.

The word that comes to my mind is "uppity." White Southerners used that word for Blacks who got beyond safe stereotypes. Black people have been shot, beaten, strung up or run off for it. But Black people have survived for being uppity. We bring ourselves up when we write, when we speak out to destroy those definitions that limit who we are. We build a newer, freer base from which we can be whole people. When ideas spread, are discussed, we benefit. We become strong.

Feminist writers reside to the left of how capitalism defines us, how men define us, how our condition as women, as colored and as gay people define us. We must present in our writing weapons to attack racism, sexism, homophobia, class oppression and capitalism. These are the ideas we must fight because they are the real separatists, the real dividers, the real oppressors. "Tell it like it is." The very difference in our voices will set us free. (applause)

MARGO RIVERA: I've been doing nothing but working for the past month so I'm going to keep my talk short. When you call something "feminist writing" I think it means to be pro-women and that it's all women: women of color, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, women of all ages. I feel I can't split myself . . . into women and other. Writing that's racist or homophobic is very alienating and splits us apart. Women's writing in the '60s was very important but mostly it came from white, middle-class women: Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Adrienne Rich. All other women were sub-set alternatives. Today things are changing. We have anthologies of writing by lesbians, Black women and working women but we still have a lot of stories that remain untold.

Our stories and experiences are coming out in different forms. Women are learning that it's okay to share our lives in journal writing and letters. As we get away from mainstream writing we're going to be getting more diversity of experience. I need to be able to turn to writing that covers all the issues, not just what it's like to be a woman. I need to hear Holly Near sing about people getting killed by the junta in South America, about women not being able to walk the streets without getting raped and beaten, about how important it is for us all to join together and fight. It's important for us to make connections between different kinds of oppression because we're all getting screwed. It's no different for me to get beaten up because I'm a lesbian or because I'm a woman or because I'm a mongrel. (applause)

ANN FINGER: One thing that's been a little disappointing to me about this conference is that things have gotten rushed and there hasn't been time for discussion. I think that's the most important and exciting thing about a conference so I want to open for discussion now. (first reads WWU resolution)

CAROL TARLEN: Could you name some women writers you feel write similar, homogenized poetry?

DANIELS: In what context? Feminist writers?

TARLEN: Yes.

DANIELS: I wasn't talking about feminist writers who speak all the same. I was speaking about establishment types, the academic, high-flown language where you have to be educated to hear what they have to say. That's the sort of writing I'm against. Feminists have a diversity of theory. But I'd like to see more women in (regular) journals. With separatism, women withdraw and try to find some utopia. It's good to have a supportive core but we have to get out in the world and struggle.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: When I look at feminist writing, while there's a lot I like, there's also hegemony by a group I feel never goes to work or worries about money. All they worry about is their lover or their moods. I had a feminist creative writing teacher who told me I thought too much. There's an anti-intellectualism, an incredible emphasis on your inner world, your dream world, and a degradation of material reality. I picked up a pamphlet in the Women's Studies Office at SF State about the Aegean Women's Studies Institute. For thousands of dollars these 10 or 12 women who are hot names in women's studies are going to teach in Greece whereas SF State is a low cost university dedicated to public education. I wanted to propose an East Oakland Women's Studies Institute. (applause) I was about to write a scathing letter to Plexus when I thought: "Oh god, all these people have all this power. What if I ever want a job through

them?" So there's a monied establishment that feels if you write about El Salvador it's not feminist writing but if you write about Tampax it is. This makes me angry.

FINGER: I agree. I like to go out and look at the moon but half the time you can't see it for all the pollution. And if you think about your relationships, it all comes back to society. So let's link up these things.

DANIELS: I have nothing against the Goddess. (laughter) I have nothing against studies of women's spirituality. I think it's good. I also believe in quality women's journals. Women have to fight to keep these journals going and some are dying. What I'm against is the repetition of certain names and of spirituality being an end in itself. Spirituality has to be channeled into action.

WOMAN IN RED SHIRT: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others wanted to speak about abolition but were told they couldn't because they were women. I don't think it's unrelated that the system that's oppressing us as women is oppressing us as Black or working class. (But) a difference is that ethnic writers have an identity, a place to go home to, whereas women, because they're fit into the family unit, don't. Separatism has been a way of creating a community, a place to go home to. Judy Grahn referred to separatism as a tool. What I want to ask is what is the nature of this tool? I believe in the importance of women's culture. I think women on the whole are getting more radical. In hearing about what keeps us apart, I think feminism may be a way to help solve some of the old rivalries and disputes.

CARLA SCHICK: I see a difference between separatism as a political ideology and as autonomy. As an ideology, it's a refusal to look at class differences. It sees men as the enemy and becomes biological determinism—there's nothing that can be done about it—rather than sees sexism as something rooted in the cultural structure, as something that can be changed. I believe there's a relation between sexism and class oppression. What Gabrielle was saying about censorship has to do with censorship of Left writing. Leftist women writers are being censored in feminist presses because separatists don't want to hear what they have to say. We have to address this and hold our presses accountable. (applause)

FINGER: Regarding what was said about women getting more radical, I think women are being pulled in two directions. On the right wing it's Phyllis Shaffley and Anita Bryant. Most of the people in the Right To Live Movement and Anti-ERA are women. We can't afford to say, "Well, someone's my sister so that's all right."

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN 2: I read an article on that in *Mother Jones*. Women active in the Right work as sisters and get to get out of the home. While they're anti-woman's issues, they see their power as women. A woman might get an abortion one day and work against abortion the next because (she) feels so conflicted on the issue. We have to figure how to go to those women and show that feminism has something for them. We can't do that as separatists.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN 3: As Leftist feminists we also need to address what it means to be a parent in this society and what that has to do with our being isolated. If you have kids, what does that do to your ability to be able to write or even think?

DANIELS: Alice Walker discussed that in *Ms Magazine* a couple of years ago. Her mother asked her why she didn't have more children. She replied: "With one child I have some freedom. With more children I'm a sitting duck."

Regarding what Ann said about Anita Bryant, I read in *Off Our Backs* that she's seen some light regarding the divorce from her husband. Once they realize they're doing the very opposite of what they're against, they'll begin to see the light.

TARLEN: I'd like to reiterate what was said about motherhood. I'm a working mother. I have to work. Capitalism created the single family unit and, as mothers, we have to see ourselves as (victims?) of this structure.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN 4: Another danger from the Right is the danger of war. Militarization is affecting us economically with the cutback of services. We can't separate the issues of women and women's equality from the issues of work. Women are paid less than men for working. Racism, too—the working class as a whole has to take up these issues that go so far beyond this room. (applause)

DANIELS: The WWU is not a single-issue organization. We can't just be for the ERA. We have to grasp all the elements of what keeps us from being ourselves and doing what we really want to do. I mean, who knows when we may need an abortion, or need food stamps, or need a job? Who knows? We

have to be protected and, in order to be protected ourselves, we have to fight.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN 5: How can we focus on these ideas in writing whether journalistically, in poetry, plays or other cultural ways? How can our ideas go out in writing?

DANIELS: We can make those who run the established journals listen to us. I don't just want to see special issues of women of color in a magazine. I want to see magazines open to all women all the time.

OLDER WOMAN: I have a slightly different perspective because I've worked in publishing for about 11 years. I think we're in an extreme state of disarray at present. I don't mean we should always be in array, (laughter) but I haven't seen much evidence that what we're publishing today is much different than what we did 3 or 5 years ago. So what's the next step? How is today different? What's upsetting me so and why I came here today is . . . well, so many feminists aren't doing creative writing or introspection. We haven't really explored what motherhood means to us all, for instance. This is an issue that's unique to women.

DANIELS: What will you do?

OLDER WOMAN: I'm not a creative person though, hopefully, I'm a catalyst. I'll have to wait and see.

DANIELS: That presents a dichotomy. As I see it, (the purpose of) feminist writing is to bring out who we are and to inspire others to do something about it. Moving people to do things—well, that's why there's been censorship. Pablo Neruda came out and told his people who the enemy was. That's why he was killed. He was a voice against the CIA and the multi-national corporations.

We each have our own personal solutions, our own agendas, our own ideas. You have to do something yourself to move other people. If you see something that fires you up and gets you going, do it. We all have a chance to be leaders. We can't just rely on June Jordan or Adrienne Rich to do everything for us.

LOUISE NAYER: Because small press funds are being cut, I see a big danger of women's writing having to go underground.

OLDER WOMAN: I see a paradox. Big publishers (increasingly) have to publish only best sellers. For a while they published some feminist writers but that's ending because of the weird economics of our time. What this means to the rest of us is this: in a funny way we can get it together because of the new technology that's come into place, word processors, for instance, and computers. A lot of distributors are beginning to pick up books from smaller presses. Small press books are getting out now in greater measure than ever before. So maybe, as writers/publishers, we should get a lot more sophisticated about the new means opening up to us.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN 6: If you publish a book yourself you can get it out a lot faster. There's over 100 women's bookstores now that weren't around during the first wave of women's writing and they take small press books. There's no reason we have to wait for others to do it for us any more. (end of tape)

— transcribed and edited by Steve Abbott

RETHINKING MOBILIZATION: Thoughts on the Left/Write Conference

By Juan Felipe Herrera, moderator for the Chicano Latino Panel

On February 21, 1981, Poetasumanos, an informal collective of Chicano/a writers in the Mission District, organized a workshop on *Chicano Latino Political Writing* at the Left/Write Conference. **Alejandro Murguia**, Bay Area poet and editor of *Tin-Tan* (San Francisco), **Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano**, political theatre critic and editor of *Metamorfosis* (Seattle, Wa.) and **Tomas Ybarra-Frausto**, professor of Chicano and Latin American literature at Stanford University gave their respective presentations: "Chicano Latino literature in the Bay Area," "The Role of Women in Chicano literature," and the "History of Chicano Latino literature." Unfortunately, these taped discussions were lost thereby forfeiting the possibility for transcription.

Rather than attempting to reiterate the panelists' contributions, I would like to sketch some general issues generated by these discussions and intensified by subsequent dialogue with conference participants. These issues have to do with three related and complex strategies of mobilization: *institutionalized networks, cultural qualification and performance*. These topics have been addressed at several points during the last two decades by various groups and individuals; however, they need to be seen in relation to each other and re-examined.

INSTITUTIONALIZED NETWORKS

Any group self-identified explicitly or implicitly as a change-agent and taking on an oppositional stance to the dominant centers of power has to come to terms with the contexts in which it will operate at an optimal level. This not only brings up issues of incorporation and separatism vis-a-vis the "system" which have been rehashed to the point of becoming left catechism. More significantly, it props up the polarity of formal/informal organization as distinct channels of struggle.

A brief scan of the varied social movements during the past twenty years reveals a general progression of resistance groups, large and small, founding action centers and institutions with attendant political charters. In short, what began as a horizontal mass of political protest and activism became a select system of vertical points of organized energy. This "hardening" of the resistance movement has inevitably re-directed its organized groupings into a tense framework of resource competition within their own local, state and national arenas.

Naturally, there have been advances of sorts: symbolic gains in terms of representational power, piecemeal resolutions in crises situations and temporary shifts in state and federal policy. To reiterate, what started as a collective moment of resistance matured into a competitive system of left community organizations struggling for economic survival. Somewhere along the line we took to heart that the "formalization of resistance" was the key strategy in bringing about social and political transformation. It seems that we have not *sufficiently* nurtured what all along has given major support to the establishment of formal bodies dedicated to social change, that is, the informal process of mobilization. Characteristics of this would include exchange of information, identification of alternatives, and gathering and staging of representative action.

I use the word "*sufficiently*" to emphasize the need for a consistent and renovating left practice in working out and implementing political projects informally. I use the term also to underline the need to steadily work in much more diverse collectivities. In brief, we need to maxi-

mize already established informal networks and interconnect them at more committed and intimate levels in order to call upon a complex and powerful body of communications, experience and consciousness. We cannot continue assuming *unity* from isolated vantage points; rather, we must actively organize our expansiveness. Do we really need to add another writers' organization to the cluttered roster of competing interest groups in the left?

CULTURAL QUALIFICATION

This is something we have acquired along the way. In our desire to bring about change, given our personal experience and political interests, we have become qualified members of specific arenas of resistance and for particular cultural and social zones within the city, state and nation. Not only have we created diverse, formalized resistance centers at the level of community organization, but also and perhaps more pervasively, at personal and interpersonal levels we have established a series of specific cultural "offices" or categories for political representation and mobilization. Such "offices" are those relating to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, territoriality, age and occupation. As can be seen, the standard platform of class struggle has become a radically fluid and complex phenomenon. I will not go into the issue of subsuming such "offices" into a class framework but rather point to the notion of *exclusiveness* in the formation and maintenance of such cultural categories oriented towards change.

At a simplistic level the motto of cultural qualification reads: "we take care of our own." The notion of exclusive rights of representation and mobilization is the dominant motive. At a deeper level, it seems the left has developed a symbolic system for the division of political labor. We have delegated "ethnics" to contend with "ethnic" issues, gays with gay questions, lesbians with lesbian causes, etc. This does not overlook occasional moments of convergence among the various groups of the left. However, here we are looking at what appear to be salient features of left organizational strategies. This qualified exclusiveness parallels the exclusive formation of political elites. Consequently, if we are to focus on fortifying informal expansiveness we cannot do so without scrutinizing the system of cultural qualification that we have set up. We must increase our informal levels of resistance-work while simultaneously expanding the representational scope of our individual "office."

PERFORMANCE

Up to this point we have been talking about the left and its models for mobilization as well as potential new directions for bringing about change, but we have not mentioned who the left is attempting to mobilize in order to enhance and bring about the processes for liberation—the *people*. We have been directing our attention to essentially internal structures of organization and representation. We have not given much thought to a key ingredient in social transformation: relationship with the people. This is where a *critique of writing* comes into play, one which must examine to what point *writing* assists or arrests the development of such a relationship. Further, in the case of creative writers, the issue of relationship centers on the question of *performance* given that left writers are engaged in a variety of public forums and readings.

The assumption of an *audience* is intrinsic to the act of writing. Are we content in producing literary products even if they are offered wholesale: articles, essays, poems, lectures, seminars, readings? Is the establishment of a "new genre" of expressive resistance and its commercialization the goal? It certainly is the goal of dominant interests to come up with a *literature of resistance* since it implies a market. However, there is a greater question: *who is the audience?*

For a moment consider the following as general features of an audience given a "literary event": 1) non-repetitive attendance, 2) situational, 3) momentary, and 4) potential antagonistic class and social orientations. Put it this way: to what degree is mobilization possible if a "literary event" is directed to an audience that is a non-repetitive entity with potentially conflicting values engaged in an event that is highly specialized and which lasts at best for a week out of the year?



Ayonne Yabro-Bejarano (l.) & Emilia Lopez (r.) at Protasumanos street market in La Orosia, Baja California. Photo by Gustavo Vasquez

This does not negate the positives of political performance which are frequently confirmed by the audience's response: sensation of unity, reinforcement of values and orientations and renovation of identity. The question we are concerned with is of another nature: are we dependent on a performance-centered model in our efforts to bring about a change oriented relationship with the people? We need to shift our attention to interaction-centered models of discourse with the community. Less podiums, more dialogue.

In summary, in lieu of workshop transcriptions, this has been a call to re-examine the left trajectory as it has evolved during the last two decades consolidating the voice and action of resistance and initiating its constituencies into key "offices" of representation in order to write and speak for a new world, in order to bring about change with the people.

Venceremos

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Take It To The Streets / Living Leaves Of Grass Workshop Summary

Leslie Simon, Poetry For The People

Kush, Cloud House

Artful Goodtimes, Director of a Colorado Council of the Arts program

John Curl, moderator

LESLIE SIMON: Poetry For The People's an incarnation of what's gone on from time immemorial, people sharing their poetry, song and dance with others. I'd been travelling in Mexico where poets are respected. People loved and knew poetry there. The only place one could see poetry in America was in college courses. So in 1975, I started a course at City College through the Black Studies Department in an attempt to take poetry into the community. We started with about 30 students, many not even those who usually like poetry, and eventually we became a collective and ran a poetry show on KPOO radio. We emphasized poetry that was easily understood. No one understands most poetry except other poets.

We started reading at coffeehouses, then went to more challenging places such as the Greyhound bus station, the unemployment line, the foodstamp office, on the streets. We were kicked out of the bus station first but they later arranged a 20-minute spot for us there. We found it's best to arrange things beforehand and not interfere with people's daily business. We've also read in several city parks under the slogan "Free Poetry, Free Food." Recently we've done poem stickers. You can get sticker paper at Arvey's. We print about three poems on a sheet and then plaster them up. A lot of people have come and gone with our group and we've decided to have a regrouping after this conference.

KUSH: I'm with Cloud House. Clouds are families made of many evaporated forms. It's important to put your head in the clouds and feel like a cloud (because) clouds release what they have to the earth. Today we have the technology of tape recorders. This is how this conference will reach people. Let words loose. There's also a strong graphic element to Cloud work. The mimeo's still a means of getting 20 to 30 pages out for under \$100. I think we should propose the conference invest in printing equipment.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: When you say Cloud House, what does that mean?

KUSH: It's a storefront on 16th Street below Mission Dolores that's been going since November, 1976, a place of exhibition for poems and a meeting place for poets. Your visions aren't just private but can reach out to others. There's a lot of Cloud members here today. I met Art when street reading in the Haight. We have a Walt Whitman Gangs of the Cosmos concept representing Night Hearts, Sons of Liberty, the Diggers of Tomorrow in the Haight. We have North Beach Cloud members, too. We're into a tribal, communal situation. We're trying to change how things are conceptually set up against community so one of our focuses is how to relate people up to each other and break down the conceptual divisions that often get in the way. The importance of this conference for me is to meet people and break down the lines of separation we carry with us day in and day out, hanging in our own conventional ideas.

I'm interested in the REAL, the real powers. Some of these pictures (on the walls) are sacred. They represent ways of perceiving the cosmos from indigenous people so they have a range of thousands of years. We want to draw from the grounds of self our own indigenous backgrounds. I think everybody is, or is on the way to becoming, a native person.

ARTFUL GOODTIMES: I was just listening to Jack Forbes talking about how we can share ourselves through poetry in the Native American Workshop. That's my interest. I grew up in San Francisco but am living in Colorado now. What we learn here we can take to other places. There's a lot of art councils around the country that have a lot of money and don't know how to spend it. From Poetry for the People and Cloud House I learned how to give witness to poetry. That audience is the measure of your importance encapsulates the European conception. But there's also an older tradition of giving witness. The only problem in this society is that the only people allowed to give witness are those who sell out enough to be popular whether it's punk rock or whatever, not that you can't use these things. But the important thing to remember is going in first, then going out, as it

breathing or smoking a peace pipe. Kush and I were on The Longest Walk where they had that ceremony where you breath in the invisible fire and then breath it out as smoke. That means to speak, to create the world. We can go out and become that kind of catalyst. Each of us has incredible powers. Jack Mueller's Union of Street Poets, for instance, is one way to create the awareness.

We live in a culture where only certain people have access to media. Like Lautréamont, I think poetry should be made by all. Also, in poetry, I think we learn what it is to be human, to be in touch with the place where you are, the forces of the earth. This is the energy we should listen to, not to those workshops with their hierarchies of writing. If you listen to nature, it doesn't have hierarchies. It's kind of funny about Pound, growing up in Idaho, going back to Europe to find out what culture was all about, but ignoring the culture that's been here six or seven thousand years.

KUSH: I feel this workshop is meant to give methodologies. I see the cassette tape recorder as a lethal weapon. Vanguarders of us should go out with radio cassette players and, instead of playing disco-bop, play some consciousness. That's one future methodology. Another Cloud House methodology has been open readings every Thursday night. We've had some 218 so far. People can inter-
knit. There's no sign-up list.

We have to change the shape and nature of our outside environments. Right now, even our buildings are conventionalized, like standing in attention to Ronald Reagan. The way things are being repainted into this bourgeois environment. We've also had Poet Congresses to discuss these issues: how we can get out of private property, how to deal with 1984, cleansing the doors of perception.

LESLIE: I know some poets are against this but in street poetry you have to be a performer because people are so used to TV. It really helps to integrate music and dance into poetry. Poetry used to do this and we have to come back to it. Gil Scott Heron got poetry on AM radio.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: There are a lot of free neighborhood magazines now. We can infiltrate the local media by writing letters to the editors and doing book reviews.

LESLIE: That's a good idea, too, to think of where the community is in terms of print. The Asian American Writer's Workshop had a good idea around the I-Hotel struggle. They made a calendar of photos and poetry. The ordinary person who wouldn't pick up a poetry book will pick up a calendar.

CHARLES UPTON: I've been doing some solidarity work in Marin where the El Salvador issue's really big. We put on a video-tape lecture in a church to get people who usually don't go to poetry or political events. There was space for a couple of poems at the end to get the event. We can work with other vanguard groups like anti-nuke and antidraft events, too. Also poets can learn a lot from people who are working politically.

KUSH: Right. We can write for a lot of different issues, to everyday living, not just art for art's sake.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: We can internationalize our art, too. I see that as one poetic responsibility.

SUSU JEFFREY: Maurice Kenny asked, "Who are you going to sell your books to?" in the Native American Workshop. He said go to your neighbors.

KUSH: At some point there'll be more government money for poetry. I don't see that as bad. At the Cloud we have *Blake Times*. You don't need a business suit to sell your books. You can touch people's imaginations, especially younger people.

SUSU: Poets can organize benefits, too. I've also gotten poems in the *Abalone Alliance Newsletter* and *The Call* out of Chicago. I know that's reaching an audience. We can all be publishers, too, put poems out on postcards.

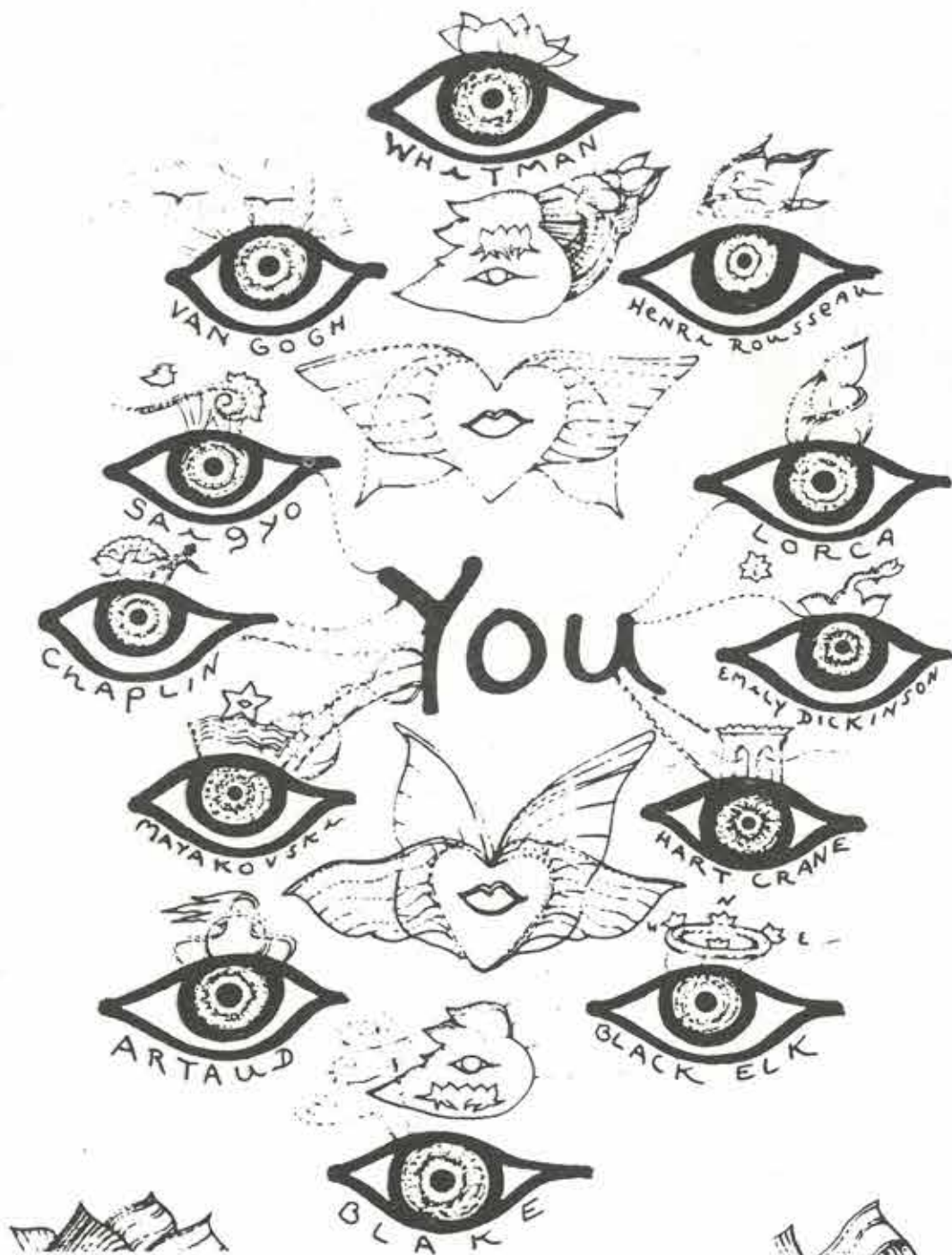
LESLIE: You can put poems on tee-shirts, too, and there's poems on busses. Once we read poems on South Africa at a film showing at the Roxie.

MAN: There's a political tradition in this country that's turned poetry and the arts into decoration. It's looked on as a luxury. So if there's extra time at a rally, poetry will come after the speeches are over. We have to develop self respect for ourselves as artists and insist our work be treated equally with that of the other speakers.

LESLIE: We're fighting for a free society. Since poetry is part of life, it shouldn't be put in the background.

MAN: Poetry is the bread, not just the icing.

KUSH: Poetry has to become a 24-hour experience because if you're just waiting to get your reading, your gig, that's hardly enough to sustain any real artist. William Blake says, "If you don't



practice your art you're going to lose it." The daily assertion of that is to devote space in your home for your art. We can put things up in our windows, doorways, hallways. Language is not just phonemes and morphemes. Everything here is language. Our bodies are language. Our limbs are beautiful letters in our movements. We have to break up this compartmentalization that puts poets in a closet and on the periphery instead of at the very center and heart of life. Your writing is not only the center of your self but of your community.

ART: That imagination is suppressed is a problem in all the arts. I was at the Survival Gathering this summer, and poetry wasn't given any particular prominence in that framework. We've lost the holistic harmony of ourselves, and poetry is one pathway to this. But we also have to respect each other and not go into places with arrogance. One person at the Survival Gathering had almost an arrogant attitude in forcing the organizers to put poetry on the main stage. I think we should give the stage to those with 20 or 30 years experience like Tillie Olsen and Meridal Le Sueur.

WOMAN: I'd like to hear less about how we can get our poems out and more about how we can make our poems revolutionary.

LESLIE: That's a major question. Once you get to the Greyhound bus station, what are you going to say?

DAVID MOE: In order to bring poetry to the people it's necessary that they receive it. It has to relate to them personally, to expand their dreams personally and socially. Just to put forth depressing, negative poetry won't do it. (We have to) carve the tree without cutting it down which takes a craft and wisdom combining the found and the creative. A lot of protest poetry puts blinders on people. You have to start with the good. This is how major xerox companies get far with their inventions, out of brainstorming sessions like this one. They call it Imagineering. They persuade people by emphasizing the positive, their use of logos, etc. Leftists have to do this too, and expand people's imaginations.

JACK HIRSCHMAN: The hermetic idea of the poet is just bullshit. We're fundamentally cultural workers when we're out in the street doing agitprop.

KUSH: My interest is to form a democratic culture. We've had very successful counter-culture movements in the Bay Area: *The Oracle*, KPOO radio. Let's examine our successful histories.

ALLEN COHEN: There's a battle of minds going on in this country. I don't know if it's enough to go out on streetcorners and read poems into the wind. We need to produce something that will have wider and wider influences. *The Oracle* started from a dream I had about a newspaper with rainbows on it. We put fliers in the Haight and had six months of planning meetings involving struggles over who would control it, progressive labor people or poets or whoever. But eventually *The Oracle* came out and spread all over the world.

All of us have immense ideas, immense poems inside us. What we lack is a form to put it in. Each age or period of time creates a vehicle. At that time it was to do a judo with the negative newspaper format and to make that a celebration of life. Now we have a new media, the cassette tape. This could be used as a new kind of magazine.

LESLIE: But we have to reach people with work they can understand. I used to read my poems to fellow workers to see if they were getting across. Lew Welch talks about reading his work to fellow cab drivers and at the pool hall.

KUSH: One thing about reading 'in the wind' is that what we see with our senses is a part of the world. There are many other worlds in co-existence: the elders. Whitman is here. Lew Welch is here. Our bodies are cloud houses, hotels lived in by any number of beings. So the revolution isn't just about getting food and shelter but also about how we see. Why aren't children curious anymore? Why do our adolescents walk around like old people and have no opportunity to live like Huck Finn because that's out? If you look at us from the sun's point of view or from a mountain or tree's point of view, things take on their original and actual glorious nature.

DAVID MOE: I don't see this as a value except for ecological considerations. One of the problems in these revolutions is that they're based on a primitive mind, a lizard mind. They haven't evolved to humanness. We haven't accepted our human body. We can't take our clothes off. It's this vegetative myth of putting nature above human beings. We need a new sense of humanism.

MAN: If there's no revolutionary poetry, there may be no revolution.

KUSH: We're in a watershed. If you desecrate the earth, you desecrate your own body. The earth

is us. Just having respect for things has political consequences.

ART: Poetry springs from place, from the earth. As Europeans we've lost this sense.

DAVID: Well, native people got poems from other planets. We're not based totally on the idea of the earth. The vegetative myths and European are based on the acceptance of death and the idea that there's a spook in nature. Man is nature but man doesn't accept nature totally . . .

KUSH: Isn't it a wonder that herbs will cure us, that everything in nature is not totally toxic?

WOMAN: We can respect the hell out of the California ocean but this doesn't mean Standard Oil isn't going to go and rape it. I mean, what is the heart of the rape of our environment and the rape of us daily in our jobs? We aren't getting to the heart of it. It's not just a matter of respecting a tree in your backyard. We have to aim our poetry at the source (of our oppression).

MAN: I think we're clashing about what nature worship is and what we feel as the need for a definite social revolution. Snyder went off and abstracted nature. You could say he advertised it. The myths that we look at nature through may have reactionary elements, too, but Marxists may see nature as something simply to be used. I can't solve this but I think it's a real crux: what mythology or worldview should we develop to mediate our experience? What's the next step after materialistic communism that would write poems about tractors, and a nature worship that tends to go into fantasy and individualism, that would say nature is "the poet's lady" and destroy the commonality of nature?

KUSH: Cloud House is not just into nature worship though we do celebrate nature. I think we need to get to collective visions and to methodologies to achieve this.

MAN: Well, how would you get into these methodologies?

WOMAN: I think you have to give people power. The question is how to facilitate this.

FRED PIETARIAN: I think there's less possibility that technology will be abused under socialism than under capitalism . . . A lot of nature worshippers have been right wing because they're not interested in all people having happiness. They're just interested in running off by themselves and having their own trip.

ALLEN COHEN: I don't see socialism as more in tune with nature. The U.S.S.R. is totally committed to nuclear energy which will lay hundreds of thousands of years of disease on the earth . . . (end of tape)

— transcribed and edited by Steve Abbott

Second Panel: How Can Writers Best Join In A Unified Political Struggle?

William Mandel, KPFA commentator, translator of the quarterly journal *Soviet Studies in Literature*, author of 7 books on the Soviet Union.

Amber Hollibaugh, an editor of *The Socialist Review*, member of the SF Lesbian and Gay History Project, worker at Modern Times Bookstore.

Ron Silliman, edits *The Tenderloin Times*, teaches poetry workshop in the Tenderloin, author of *Tjanting, Ketjak*.

Diane Di Prima, author of over 20 books of poetry including *Revolutionary Love Letters* and *Loba*.

Denise Kastan, moderator, critic, publisher of Hoddypoll Press, manager of Small Press Traffic Bookstore.

WILLIAM MANDEL: I was born in New York City and am Jewish. In my early teens, exactly half a century ago, I lived in Moscow where my father worked as an engineer. There I met Langston Hughes whose poetry I later recited at Young Communist League meetings in Cleveland: "Let America be America again, the land that never has been yet but will be."

Fifteen years later I was in the bodyguard for Paul Robeson for an outdoor concert where it was known fascist snipers with rifles had come. I was in that bodyguard because I valued his life above mine. When the Korean War started and I was a peace candidate for Congress on a ticket headed by W.E.B. DuBois. I converted my final campaign rally into a Robeson concert because he'd been blacklisted from every concert hall in the country.

I begin this way because of what I heard at yesterday's panel about cultural imperialism of the white American Left towards Black culture. That's not the American Left I grew up in. It taught me to respect Langston Hughes as a great poet. I recited his poetry because I loved it and it said what I believed in better than I could say it. I was also taught to admire Latin American writers. I didn't know Spanish but I read translations of Neruda in *The New Masses* long before non-communist Americans knew he existed.

The tradition of the American Left was one of internationalism. While the Communist Party carried forward this tradition more thoroughly than ever before or since, it existed earlier. Mark Twain, a San Franciscan for all practical purposes (laughter), belonged to the Anti-Imperialist League that bitterly fought Phillipine annexation. To forget John Brown would be just as unfair as to forget Nat Turner. To forget white Abolitionist poets would be as unfair as to forget Frederick Douglass. It's not being white that whites should be ashamed of, but of having permitted racism to have dominated, and dominate today, among whites. The film *Salt of the Earth* is best known today among Feminists but it was the first to show Chicano workers, and specifically Chicanas, as people of dignity. This film was made by Communist Party members blacklisted out of Hollywood, some of them stage actresses from San Francisco.

My purpose here is not to uphold a political party. I was thrown out of the Communist Party nearly 30 years ago for having a mind of my own. (laughter and applause) My purpose is to demonstrate that Marxist socialism has proved by its record that working class internationalism works, that it's not mere theory but history. I proposed that a longshoreman, George Benet, speak to a workshop yesterday. And after I heard the discussion after yesterday's panel I was doubly glad I'd pointed out the incongruity of a Left conference having no representatives of the working class as such. The emphasis of yesterday's discussion was almost exclusively on the issue of gender and sexual preference.

I've marked International Women's Day annually on my KPFA broadcasts since 1958, many years before that day was rediscovered by the modern women's movement. But socialism—and this is specifically a Left writer's conference—rests upon the idea that it's the struggle between social classes, not sexes, that's the motive force of our epoch. So long as there's unemployment (which is an integral part, a law of capitalism), full equality for those discriminated against under this system, whether women or non-whites, is impossible. So a Left writers union must bear in mind that its objectives cannot be fully obtained other than in an alliance with, and in support of, the working class. Most certainly this takes patience, even lifetimes of patience.

At the Chicano writer's workshop yesterday, people spoke with disgust at the need to explain to Anglos year after year the same, basic historical facts about Chicano culture. I am sick and tired that after 40 years in my own field I still have to repeat the elementary fact that there's no unemployment in the Soviet Union, a fact Americans knew better 50 years ago than they know today. But the other side, which controls the media, teaches anti-Chicano chauvinism, white racism and male supremacy, just as it teaches anti-Sovietism every single day. And there isn't a damn thing we can do but go on patiently repeating the truth until the time comes again, as it came in the '30s, when the self-interest of the white working class of a new generation will compel it to think about truths that, for the time being, it isn't willing to look at.

But when it does (see the truth) the results are marvelous. Look at the proliferation of murals in the Latino community with its roots in the great Mexican tradition, or the Rincon Annex post office, or Coit Tower, or George Washington High School. These murals come out of the alliance between the San Francisco working class and the city's creative artists that arose during the General Strike of 1934. Another result was the California Labor School which was the birthplace of the Actors Workshop, the direct ancestor of ACT. Still another was the graphic arts workshop where the struggle against racism and male chauvinism was a constant element. It's no accident that an emigre Russian artist, Victor Arnautoff, did the stupendous litho of Harriet Tubman for the CAW.



William S. Gray, 1974

calendar and a superb tiny litho of thousands of marching longshoremen after the 1934 shootings titled "Labor Buries Its Dead." (voice breaks with emotion, pauses) Before this kind of audience I'm not ashamed of my emotion (applause)

In 1947, the California Labor School conducted the last conference in San Francisco like this one. I had the honor of speaking on that occasion as well. But the school and the movements it launched were smashed by McCarthyism. What we are here for today is to make sure we are not smashed by Reaganism, and that we not only defend our own interests as writers, but that we smash Reaganism instead. (loud applause) It's not only the preservation of NEA grants and ethnic studies programs that concern us. We in the Bay Area have a special responsibility to the American people.

The Alameda D.A. who unsuccessfully prosecuted my son and the rest of the Oakland Seven is the new head of Criminal Prosecution at the Justice Department. The whole Reagan team and its philosophy came into being in response to the '60s movements in the Bay Area. They no doubt have their eyes on us here today but we have our eyes on them, too, and we have an advantage. They cannot possibly solve the problems of the people in the United States, not with their policy of bankrupting us all in their insane attempt to gain military superiority over the U.S.S.R.

Our people's protests have already begun and, in part, been successful with respect to Social Security. But culture and education are still scheduled to be slashed to the bone. That is why we need a writer's union, to embrace us all, to defend and advance the things we have in common regardless of class, race, gender or sexual orientation. No one is proposing a union that would

Interfere with the rights of any of the communities of which we are composed. We have more in common than is realized. Listening to Chicano writers talking yesterday about their struggle for a bilingual literature and education I remembered a similar 1920s discussion among Jewish writers in New York. (gives other examples of common experiences of Left writers of different communities)

Political discrimination is as deadly to creativity, to scholarship and to life as any other kind of discrimination. In Nazi Germany they went after the Communists first, then the Socialists, then the unionists, then the Jews, Gypsies and gays. We need unity among ourselves. We need unity with the other arts. We need unity with non-artists in our communities and we need unity with the working class because only in that class resides the power to change the nature of society.

AMBER HOLLIBAUGH: I was called about an hour ago and asked if I could replace Tillie Olsen on this panel as she was sick. I freaked out. What could it mean to replace Tillie Olsen (laughter) If it wasn't for her and the way she broke the silences around the questions of class and sexuality it wouldn't be possible for me to be here today. As a working class woman, all of whose education came through being in the Left, Feminist and lesbian movements, I am completely thrilled by the idea of this conference. It's easy to read about history but it's not easy to see yourself and your own events in your own creation of your history.

I'm working class, I'm lesbian, I'm white. I've been on the Left since I was 16 and in SNCC. I learned about Marxism from Communist Party members early on. They were the only ones to take me seriously. It's through my struggles that I've learned what it is that I know. A year and a half ago I joined *The Socialist Review* with hesitation. I'd been in the Feminist movement a long time and decided it was time to make structural links again with the Left, not that I ever felt I was not part of the Left even when they didn't see me as part of it. I wanted to directly affect the politics we all could see we were creating. I saw things had radically changed in the last 3 or 4 years. Many new organizations and cultures had begun to make their voices heard. For many years my own voice as a woman on the Left and a lesbian in the closet had been silenced. Seeing that things could combine made me think maybe I could combine who I was in the making of a journal that for a long time I was just glad existed.

When I see us here today, some of what I think about is the struggle I've gone through with myself to try and understand how to hear voices that don't directly affect the way I survive. It's very difficult to know how we can combine the things that are unique among us without compromising or giving up our differences. That's the question we struggle with by coming here today. How can we keep the sharpness and knowledge that from the individual ways we struggle as women, people of color, lesbians, working class or all of those things? How can we keep our vision sharp and unique and precise and beautiful and still cooperate with other people? I don't have a magic answer but I think this is an adult response to a situation that 10 years ago we wouldn't have had. This very conference is a clear indication that the time has come for us to find another network, another way of perceiving each other in the independence of our struggles.

One of the finest things San Francisco offers is the incredibly diverse, angry, brilliant multitude of cultures and voices that frequently, more so in recent years, come together to find the common thread. That's also what communism's about so it doesn't seem like an alien theory to me. I need each person's struggle, each way people perceive themselves, both the oppression they suffer and the beauty they see, to be a part of me. And our responsibility isn't just to those of us in this room now, but to create a network for those who haven't found us yet to create in ways that perhaps we didn't have. We were alone. We didn't know how to find each other, even in our own culture. We had no way to see ourselves as artists, photographers, painters, speakers. That was something we couldn't even self-create because who we were for most was a people who knew how to survive and that's different than a people who know how to create, something you give back in an articulated form.

All of us lived and learned through our parents who were—I mean my parents were brilliant. I loved my father's stories, my mother's, but it never went farther. Those voices were never heard except through me. And that's what each one of us carries, the voices that aren't heard.

So when I think what political unity means it's to reach out and nurture others in ways we never got. I'm damaged in ways that break my voice in critical places. I'm hurt in ways I can only look at

but don't know how to mend. So I want to create ways that people won't be damaged but can give a fuller and richer voice back to their communities. Let's listen to our differences not as antagonists but as something that's unique we need to consider and absorb into our own consciousness.

To me, that's how you create unity, by confronting differences and using them for the benefit of all.

This conference gives us a way to begin as the panels articulate both what's common to us and what's different. If we can listen to where the rough spots are, maybe next time we won't need to say the same things. I don't want differences to disappear because I don't want what's so personally connected to how I self-define to be diffused. But I am interested in moving forward into other structures, other movements, other cultures and saying: "This is all my parts. This is not all the world but this is me. What are your parts? How can our parts fit together?" (loud applause) So let's listen to what hurts us the most, to the truths that are hardest to face, to the beauty we're just learning to articulate. Let's find those things in each of us and never give up. Then, as revolutionaries, we can combine and have a truly revolutionary way to confront the Reagan Administration. We're survivors and we're creators. That's how we can fight the attack from the Right.

When I was fighting the Briggs Initiative, I traveled for two months in a van to 35 small cities in Northern and Central California. I went to places where most of us don't spend much time. (laughter) It's dangerous to be a lesbian in those places, but I could go in and do the public work that lesbians and gay people in those towns couldn't afford to do and survive I debated fundamentalist ministers like the Rev. Royal Blue who was quite an extraordinary speaker, I must admit. (laughter) The old fart. (louder laughter) People had never come together to fight over sexual issues in those towns. My history in the Left allowed me to do this. Also I was raised in Northern California so I had a sense of those towns and how to be in them.

What I learned was a whole new sense of what unity meant. Isolation meant something very different there because nobody had any place else to go, no other choices. You had to stay and fight it out. You had to find those things you had in common and use them to understand the differences. That was a beautiful but scary experience. My car was run off the road a couple times and some people tried to kick in my hotel door once. But the hardest part was to find the indigenous gay communities in those places because those were voices that had never been heard. How could they find me if they couldn't find each other? I'd never considered being "out" so important. You see I had to leave my home town because I couldn't survive there and be a dyke. I had run and now I went back. I reclaimed myself and went back.

And I talked about being a Socialist there. I figured, well, what the hell. (laughter) People would call up (on a radio talk show) and say, "I've heard all gay people are communists." Well, it would be hard to be gay in this society and not be. I took the Communist Manifesto with me and handed it out like I handed out the gay stuff. People didn't have access to that material there and I felt it was my responsibility to give them access. So when I think of our unity I think about that experience and what it means to go home, at least symbolically, and confront who we are. If we can find a way to bring that to each other and create and nurture the new communities that are coming after us so they'll have a better way to articulate the struggles we'll be fighting in 40 years, this conference will have been a success.

RON SILLIMAN: This is one of the most exciting days of my life as a writer. Our question assumes first, we have some knowledge of who we are (and I think, as a result of these past 2 days, we do); secondly, some model of unification; thirdly, how unification plays a specific role in the larger political struggle necessary at this time. Because of Reagan we must be more organized. We're not as we should be, as we were in 1968, let alone 1940.

I want to focus on poetry of the kind that's normally considered, as Bruce Boone told me yesterday, "middle class." It's the kind of poetry that's normally taught in colleges. It's the kind I come from and which is often used to shut other people out. Those in middle class poetry have been slow to recognize their relationships to other communities. That's for specific historic reasons I want to go into.

How middle class poetry—both academic and non-academic (e.g., that following Don Allen's *New American Poetry* anthology), is structured by its problematic relationship to what Poulantzas has called the "new petit bourgeoisie" or what I call "middle strata workers." This involves service workers, secretaries and so on. To the extent that we don't recognize ourselves as workers is our historic problem.

In 1977, 42,000 titles were published. This is 4 times the number as in the 1950s when 9,000 to 12,000 a year was average. Of all these books published, only 1,700 were poetry books and only 41 or 4% of this was from corporate publishers. The common perception walking into Cody's or Books Plus is not that 96% of all poetry comes from small presses or is self-published, however. At best you see 50%, but more likely 10-20% of the poetry from small presses. A similar censorship of access is reflected in anthologies used in college. In the *American Poetry Anthology* 54% of the poetry books come from corporate publishers, 31% from university presses and one-half of the small press poems from one press which belongs to the editor. That's symptomatic of how people become invisible and it affects not only oppositional writers.

The decentralization of poetry writing is another aspect of this funneling process. Poets relate to small groups usually. In 1977, 168,000 volumes of poetry sold, less than the 192,000 rapes reported that year. Since poetry invokes a network of small, interlocking and very specific communities, we must address how to keep our sharpness and specificity and still unify.

Secondly, contemporary literature criticism is content-oriented, not distribution-oriented. To study the social organization of poetry, you'd probably have to go to a sociology department. There's a lot of different kinds of Black, gay, even working class groups and they relate differently even within their (specific) communities.

In the writing workshop I teach, about 1% of the Tenderloin community comes and brings their work. On a national scale that would mean 2,000,000 poets. Very few actively publish or are even interested in publishing. That's all right. I come from a working class background but was educated beyond my class. (laughter) That's how we're made problematic. I had a teacher at (S.F.) State who thought it was his job to stop people from writing and said so in the first day of class.

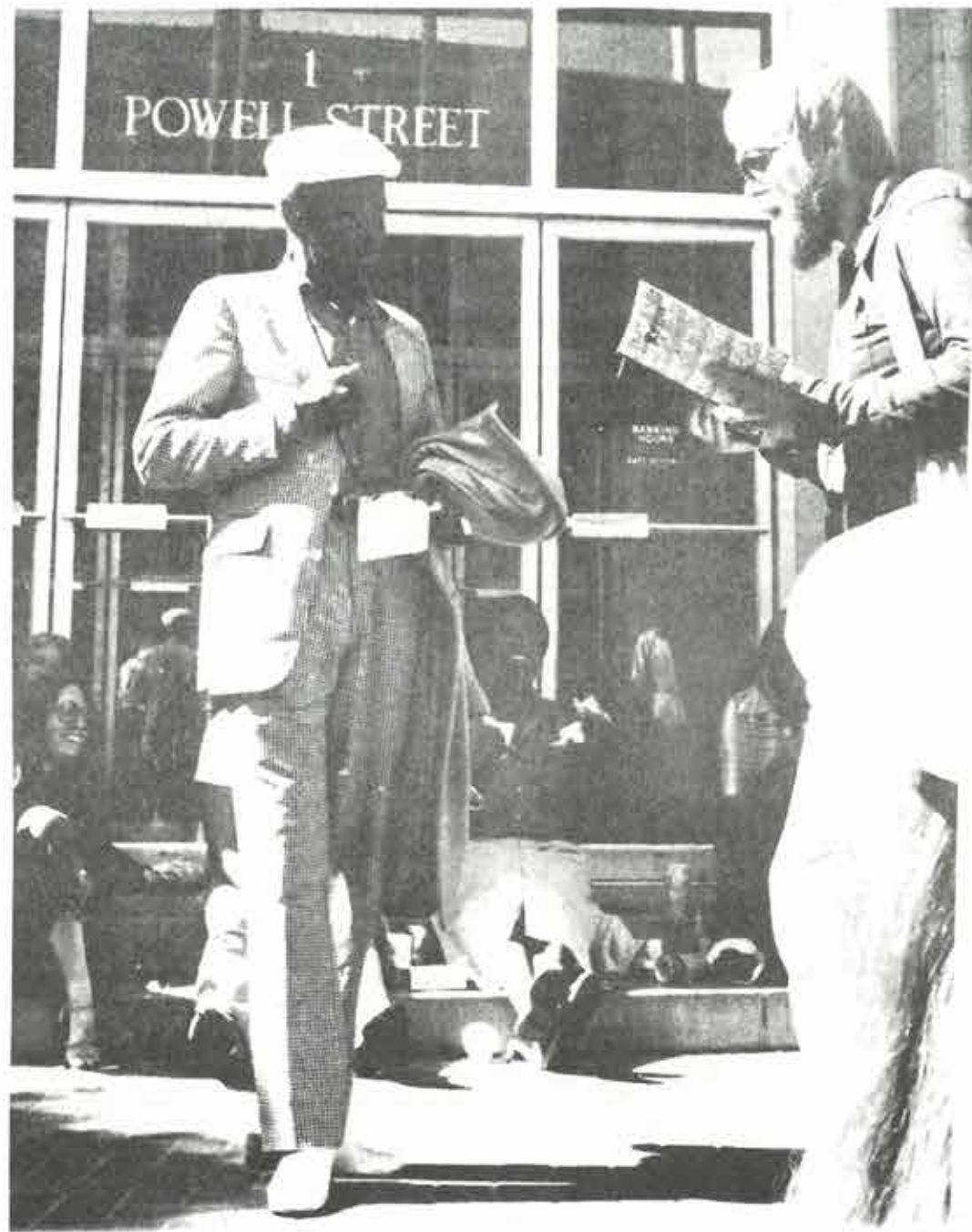
Bearing on how poets socially organize themselves, I'd like to paraphrase the last chapter of *Capital* substituting general terms for terms relating specifically to literature:

The writing of private individuals manifests itself as an element of the total writing of society. Only through the relations which the act of interchange established between the texts and through their mediation between the writers. To the writers, therefore, the social relation between their primary writing appear as what they are. That is, they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between texts.

So I have to go through a mediation—go to a store—to get the books. Poets develop networks of exchange because it's most closely tied to the marketplace. Workshops and study groups are another way. The difference is in what kind of feedback you can get. *Bridges*, a Black lit mag on the free table is a good articulation of one scene of Black poetry in Oakland. My own group is a network of 3 scenes: Bay Area, New York City and the Washington, D.C. area. The major difference between this "middle strata" poetry from other kinds of New American poetries is that people in it are very clear about the need for social organization. And that people in the group ask what is the political implication of our work, both to ourselves and those around us, including other groups of writers. A similar group who come at this more problematically are the St. Mark's poets. They're much less interested in formal social organization (reads Ron Padgett poem which ends "totally watching tv"). This man's trying to organize a tenants union but his poem is a valorization of non-organization.

Manual workers are defined as those directly engaged in producing commodities. By this definition, less than 20% of all wage-earners in the U.S.A. are workers. The largest unions in San Francisco are the service unions. A lot of artists belong to this new strata of worker.

I endorse the call for a writer's union. We have to recognize differences between us. Marxist-Leninists see Social Democrats as class collaborationists, as hopeless reformists. Social Democrats see Marxist-Leninists as millennialists and inherently sectarian. Anarchists see both groups as ready to set up oppressive bureaucratic structures and Feminists have a very interesting critique of all these groups. And there's truth to all these views. I'm a N.A.M. member. I think there's no substitution for practical political work and this is facilitated one hundredfold by working through organizations regardless of the problems that may occur. And we need these organizations more than ever under Reagan. I believe in the tangibility of local politics in radicalizing people. In the Tenderloin, I've seen non-leftists radicalized by their relation to landlords. (Such experience) can break down barriers that academic Marxism often sets up.



Ron Silliman reading his work *Ketjak* at Powell & Market, 1978. Photo by Alan Bernheimer.

What's necessary in a writers organization is to bring all Left groups together while maintaining their sharpness. We should do as we've done these past 2 days: leave our aesthetic differences at the door just as cowboys used to leave their guns at the door of the bar. Specific goals I'd hope for would be concrete ongoing projects and workshops, a journal on politics of contemporary literature (extending the question of a Carol Berge poem. *Poetry Flash* doesn't have space for that), ways we can help one another and writers like Pancho Aguila, fundraising for El Salvador, encouraging poets to get involved in different organizations.

DIANE DI PRIMA: One reason I'm here is to get more letters to William Kunstler in the Amiri Baraka case. I'm coming from a more direct line situation. I feel we're having this conference without a moment to lose. Over the last 6 months I've felt things tightening up even faster than I'd anticipated. It's like how I felt in 1953 . . . the general feeling of what few possibilities you had. But this didn't stop the work, the struggle and unification of artists groups I knew.

I think we got a little confused in the '70s about how to relate to each other. As artists we work on certain frontiers. I grew up in an Italian neighborhood that felt everybody was an artist . . . The mosaics, the wrought iron fences—that was everyone's. If we can awaken that sense then we don't have to be above people. We don't provide their culture, we draw on it.

Without paranoia, we're on the line all the time. We have to bridge differences between our neighborhoods. We also have to stay committed to our work and not sell our writing short to do political work but to make those two things one. For some of you guys, joining organizations is fine, for others it isn't. But we have to stay in touch. We (may have) ideological differences but what we must look at now is our common denominator. What do we care about? When I was younger, I said a woman would, of course, know what to do. We've got to feed people and clean up the planet. (laughter and applause) Maybe that's simplistic but I stand by it . . . It's going to get harder. We've got to take care of each other as artists and find our common ground to stay together.

In 1952 I lived with 3 other artists on an income of \$60 a month which I earned as an artist's model. We had pot luck dinners every night . . . I worked with the Diggers in 1968 . . . Act on an issue when it comes up. What resources do we have? Everyone contributes different resources, has different capacities. Some may be willing to go to jail, some to work a phone tree . . . Why haven't there already been several benefits for El Salvador? We moved much faster about Nicaragua. (applause)

I think we've been getting numbed out by Reagan. I noticed about a year ago . . . I was getting hypnotized by watching the next move those guys were making in Washington. Are they going to cut my food stamps or what? Then I realized I was playing (their) game. I wasn't putting anything positive out. I was just reacting . . . So who's ready to help out with what for our community? Everyone should know that sort of thing in every neighborhood.

QUESTION: Would you say something about the Amiri Baraka case?

DI PRIMA: . . . He was yanked out of his car by a cop who said he was assaulting his wife yet photos taken just afterward prove otherwise. Usually such charges are just dropped. Even if he's put in Riker's Island for just 6 months there's fear about what might be done to him, how he might be set up. Their house is continually ransacked, papers stolen, etc. . . . So this is a specific thing. We can have all kinds of politics and talk about that but when there's a specific thing, let's move. (loud applause) I'd just emphasize that we don't speak for people in our communities, we live with and draw on them. They're our earth and we're part of their earth, too. It's not a question of who's published and who's not. Everyone has a basic love of beauty and we need it as much as we need our bread and meat.

DAVID STEINBERG: When attacks are coming down on (gay people) hard, the campaign the "New Moral Majority" is bringing to the city, physical attacks from gangs, the American Psychological Association considering calling homosexuality a disease, mental illness again—well, I'm very angry that homophobia has come up 3 different times in speeches that men have given at this conference, by William Mandel, for instance, and I feel it's an issue that the Left has not dealt with. (loud applause) I'm willing to get behind struggles of other people. And I want to know that they'll get behind me, too. (refers to threat of violence as he walked home from conference the night before) Now that's oppression in a real, specific and political way and it's happening right here, right now. (applause)

MANDEL: What precisely were you criticizing?

STEINBERG: You inferred that sexism had been spoken of too much yesterday. Also you said the struggles that are going on were issues of class and not sex. I think it's a very male thing to separate issues in that way. To me, they're all interrelated. (applause)

MANDEL: First, I'm totally opposed to discrimination or violence against gay people here or in the U.S.S.R. or anywhere. Second, as a Marxist, I believe struggle between social classes is not the same as the issue of sex or sexual preference. I believe the solution of the class question creates the basis. It does not stop the problem of attitudes—the attitude of (Soviet leadership) is a good example. Its attitude (toward gays) is medieval—but class is the fundamental issue in this society.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: All oppression is equal!

MANDEL: The question is not whether all oppression is equal, it's what moves society. As a Marxist I'm convinced that it's class struggle that moves society. (applause)

HOLLIBAUGH: I also heard a description I didn't agree with in Bill's talk in reference to yesterday's panel. What I heard both Nellie and Judy talking about was their own class background as a thing they fall back on. And I didn't hear them talking any more specifically than they had to about their oppression around race, sex or sexual preference. But I think the issue of sexual oppression is one we'll be debating for ten years. And I think this will be a constant and painful movement between us because of the different ways we experience oppression. So I'm not sorry it's come up. But we should insist to each other that those differences are always credible to be listened to and struggled about. (applause)

DI PRIMA: I wasn't here yesterday. I was on the phone getting signatures (for Baraka). The issue of gay rights is precarious and I think, although the oppression we experience around our sexuality is as weighty as any other kind, I think the gay movement is also to some extent at fault for not aligning itself with other oppressed peoples. If you can bring 500,000 people into San Francisco for Gay Pride Day, if you could get 100,000 of that group to make even some statement about some other important issue in this community and the world at large (then) you'd begin to find that there would be morally a song with the Left. And that's needed. I'm aware that there are very active gay men and women working to bring these issues together but the impression, the majority feeling is that they're not together, that gay rights is a separate issue. This is especially oppressive to women because they're not even in a position of strength that the gay men are in. It's a very ugly situation. I think a lot of it is an internal situation that has to be worked out in the gay community so that at least part of the gay movement can make a strong stand on other issues and claim its place alongside other oppressed groups in the world. (some applause)

WOMAN IN STRIPED SHIRT: I'd like to ask about tactics we can use against fascists, like if there's a parade permit for Nazis. Also about deep division in the Left caused by ultra-Zionism and anti-semitism.

SILLIMAN: The fascist movement in the U.S. is growing. The American Nazi Party has monthly meetings in Stern Grove. Personally, I think the "friendly fascists" are more dangerous than the other kind but if we're not careful the other kind could quickly become much larger and more dangerous than at present. In terms of parade permits the question is, "What is freedom of speech?" I see a fascist rally as an assault, a violent act addressed at many people including myself. I see it as violence and not as an expression of speech. (applause)

DI PRIMA: I'd suggest reviving the old teach-in. People need to know history. The younger generation doesn't even remember the Second World War. We have to teach what Nazism's about, what it does, what it's done to people in the past, what its record is. Likewise with other issues. It's really important to start remembering history.

MAN IN WHITE SHIRT: I'd like to ask William Mandel (inaudible) . . . the U.S. and Russia, which you spoke of, are super imperialist powers . . . The CP line on art and aesthetics flows from the same (misconception). George Benet read a poem yesterday saying he didn't care about the swamps in Nigeria, he cared about how many longshoremen were maimed last year. Now that's the narrowest vision.

SILLIMAN: Damaged people have a tendency to make damaged revolutions . . . I think (the U.S.S.R.) has undergone a lot of deformation and a lot of what goes on there can be characterized as

"state capitalism." The suppression of the Russian futurists, formalists and social linguists represents problems that thus occur. *Nonetheless*, there was, in fact, a socialist revolution in the U.S.S.R. *Nonetheless*, the most militant expression of the U.S. working class in the 1920s, '30s, '40s and '50s came through the CP. Many of us have had important experiences from those who are, or were, members of the CP. (some applause) They resisted a lot and are one of the models we have to build on. I agree the Benet poem you refer to is reactionary but I was glad to see him there to provide a little realism about class contradictions culturally and ideologically.

UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: That's not what the workers think!

MANDEL: Concerning the Benet poem, there'd been emphasis earlier in the day to the effect that the white working class in this country doesn't suffer, or didn't do anything. That's horseshit! I thought Benet did a splendid job as someone who remembered the Depression and as someone who described the suffering of white working people—and white working class women in that poem. So far as alleging that the U.S.S.R. is an imperialist country, I'd simply urge you read what Fidel Castro has to say on that subject.

TEDE MATTHEWS: I respect Diane DiPrima but she made one point that I feel shouldn't go unanswered. You insinuated that it's the responsibility of gays to bring together an analysis of all the different oppressions in different communities, yet the gay community is one of the few to bridge all these differences because we're (made up of) all racial groups. In the No on Proposition 6 and 7 campaign we brought together the fight against the death penalty and the Briggs Initiative. We had a broad coalition involving labor groups and community organizations. We fought the Bakke Decision. We've fought imperialism. We formed Gays for the Chilean Resistance six years ago. There's Gays for Nicaragua.

DI PRIMA: What's going on right now? Those are old facts.

MATTHEWS: Gays for Nicaragua is still going on and had a benefit last week. (applause) Gay people had the idea for this whole conference. It's been built on our labor. Also the Lesbian and Gay Parade Committee's involved in a class struggle right now that's also anti-racist and anti-sexist. We took control from the gay bourgeoisie. But when has the straight Left ever called us up to do benefits for gay struggles? I've had to push myself into benefits for other organizations because they didn't want to be *embarrassed* about having a faggot poet. We're told we have to be *patient*, that we have to "understand." I don't think we should have to grovel on our hands and knees for acceptance from the Left. This conference should take a strong stand against homophobia. (loud applause)

DI PRIMA: I don't think you should be patient. I think gay rights should be advocated by this conference. I'm aware from people I'm close to on the Gay Pride Day Committee that there are real issues as to whether to take stands on anything at all. My sense is that the *majority* of the gay community (cares about) nothing except itself. That's my sense. (loud cries of no) You guys have a responsibility.

OLDER WOMAN: We must fortify ourselves for the struggles ahead and if we get lost too much in one issue or another without looking at the whole perspective, it's going to weaken us. We know from history that imperialism rules by constantly dividing people. (loud applause) If they feel there's an issue where they can tie a lot of young people up on pot or sexuality or other things to divide the community, they'll do it. I don't say we shouldn't try to rectify these things as much as we can but if we have an atomic war we won't have anything. So we have to watch our priorities.

SILLIMAN: I'd like to address the sexual politics question as a straight white male. I'm learning from gay people, from women, from people of color about a whole series of kinds of oppression I need to know about. I haven't been properly educated about these things because the U.S. system of education tries to keep people dumb. I think the Left seriously needs to be informed about all these movements if it's not going to be a deformed Left making a deformed revolution in this country. (applause)

But, beyond this, particularly in the women's and gay movements because they are a cross-class community, both have potential for bourgeois cooption. This is heavily facilitated by the ruling class which gives much greater access and advantage to those who (are reactionary). So it's essential for radical women and gay men to take control of their movement and express their opposition (to bourgeois tendencies).

HOLLIBAUGH: I've heard these questions arise in various ways for 15 years and I'm sure it's gone on long before that. I wish we on the Left could learn how to disagree with respect for the lack of knowledge people have, for the ignorance all of us carry, without assuming people don't support each other's struggles. Unless they say so. And, at times, part of the Left has said they don't support gay rights. Maybe we can leave here today talking about how to differentiate between the valued opinions and support all of us share for each other's struggles. If we can't do it, we've got nothing in the future. (loud applause)

— transcribed and edited by Steve Abbott

Writers As Workers Workshop

R.V. Cottam, has worked as a railway clerk, auto worker, labor organizer, is author of two college textbooks and a 50-year student of Marxism
Inez Gomez, director of Chicano Studies at University of Santa Clara, a native of Chile and on Committee of Solidarity with Nicaragua
Susu Jeffrey, moderator, poet and editor of *Merlyn Gorky*

R.V. COTTAM began by suggesting that there was too much in the conference of people doing their own thing and too little unity. "We must have genuine unity which is effective. We have been contaminated by anti-intellectualism," he said. "I am going to be guilty of exercising my intellect. We need some basic agreements on philosophy and the premises on which we operate." He said that imperialism doesn't occur just anywhere. "Imperialism is a stage of capitalism. It is an expression of capitalism only. The same with fascism."

Cottam believes that the success of the conference and the writer's union that would probably follow from it would depend on how many of the participants understood the basic definitions and axioms or principals that he would refer to. "... These will be Marxian principles ..." he said. "We live in a class society. There is a bourgeoisie and a working class. This is a fact." He noted that there are some gradations such as petty bourgeoisie, lumpen proletariat and distinctions between peasants and intellectuals. "Within Marxism a worker is anyone who produces a good or a service ... where that person lives primarily from his labor." He said that even if a Chrysler worker takes a pay cut or gets stocks, he is still a worker because he's producing. The service a writer performs is socially valuable under certain conditions. "The works of a writer may be progressive or reactionary ... Every writer is political; every writer takes a class stand; every writer who thinks he is not taking a class stand by writing explicitly for either the bourgeoisie or the working class is helping the bourgeoisie by his very silence. That is a political position on the right."

Cottam added that writers are usually workers in the economic sense in that they work in the general economy and because they write. Then he went on to define the Left, saying, "Liberals have very, very good intentions and good ideals but they don't do much about it or they're very limited in the extent to which they act. Progressives have good ideals and they will act somewhat but within the system. Radicals have good ideals and they want to change the system or they recognize that in order to attain the ideals the system will have to be changed. The Left consists of progressives and radicals. Liberals are in the middle. The Right consists of conservatives and reactionaries.

"Now how could you serve the cause of humanity, and that's a universal, by being on the Right?" Cottam asked. "How could you talk about a united conference on the Left, if you don't have the basis for unity or if you're not on the Left? The basis for unity is class membership and recognition of the fact of class struggle in our society and of the desirability of attaining a classless society.

he good writer as a worker is contributing to the realization of that classless society. A proletarian writer is one who writes about anything in such a way as to induce or encourage you as auditor or reader to move toward a classless society. The bourgeoisie is the basic oppressor. I am going to see the analogy of a symphony. There are notes and movements but in order to have musical harmony there is a central theme in addition to all the notes. I have heard so much sectarian anarchism, egocentrism and ethnocentrism here that I am about to vomit."

Cottam read his proposed resolution: "It is the sense of this body that we subscribe in general to the basic thesis that writers are workers and that class is primary in any genuine and effective unity and that all other considerations must take a subsidiary position or role." He then passed the resolution around suggesting that those who care to sign it, do so. "We must be clear. We're not excluding anybody. We want unity and it must be broad but it must be profound; it must be solid. We must not be in such a hurry to get to the revolution that we don't do it right; that we don't build it correctly on proper theoretical principles."

INEZ GOMEZ began by posing the question of how the examples of Latin American revolutions in Nicaragua and Cuba can be adapted to the local and historical differences of writers in the U.S. She wondered why people weren't talking about the common point of unity that oppresses everyone and were instead talking about those points that separate us. "That common point of unity is class," she said. "The literature in Latin America has its own history in which we see that as long as Latin America is a dependent continent where most of the population is illiterate and hungry and as long as the U.S. considers it its right to boycott, invade, blockade, murder and even dictate our rights and even how we are going to die, then the worker-writer confronts a double responsibility—his or her art and his or her social reality. Latin American writers have taken up this responsibility."

"Writer-workers cannot ignore this dialectical responsibility and must see economic and international relations and technology in each country. In Latin America there is a search for decolonization; to look for authentic roots, an identity at all levels from economic to political and cultural. Our main example has been Pablo Neruda in Chile and many other writers, both men and women. . . . Literature is for us something that does not separate us from the people; it is with the people." She then quoted Fidel Castro's speech to the intellectuals in 1963: "Do what you want to do, express yourselves as you wish and work as you wish but do not work against the revolution." Gomez then listed the guidelines set up for writer-workers after a year of revolution in Nicaragua:

1. The contents of a work of art must be popular.
2. All writers, even those from the bourgeoisie, must be incorporated because there's a chance for them to change.
3. Quality and authenticity are necessary because the people deserve the most perfect art.
4. Cultural revolution must have a universal as well as a new popular dimension.
5. A cultural workers organization is necessary so writers can insert themselves in the Sandanista revolutionary process.

Ernesto Cardenal once said, "The people must not only consume culture but must produce culture."

A Cuban writers congress noted in 1977 that: "We cannot have genuine complete mass movement until we are able to develop art activities with the direct participation of the people. Worker-writers constitute a force of great ideological possibility for social changes."

"When I mention Cuba," she said, "I mention Latin America . . . For us, the fact that Cuba was liberated 90 miles from Florida and the fact that Nicaragua had a revolution—for us, the people of Chile, this is part of our revolution, too. This is the first door open to approach the downfall of Pinochet and the fascist junta. So, for us Latinos in South America, we have something in common; we have universalidad. We feel together with the brothers and sisters of El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala; we have that common thing. I would like that thing that we feel down there to be here with us in these 2 days."

"Literary creation in our country must contribute to the liberation of the people of Latin America and the Caribbean for the recuperation of their natural resources, economic independence and political solidarity and, at the same time, the defense of our culture. If our revolution, one of the most profound and transcendental of American history, contributes to the liberation of our brothers and sisters from imperialism, our cultural task must respond in its importance . . . to that historical objective."

In conclusion, she said that the political task of worker-writers is "to explain to the people the vital necessity of liberation. The scope of the struggle is to show that the best traditions of the people have been buried by colonialism . . . to help build a culture that has been fragmented and isolated by imperialism." This takes action, she said. "Imperialism is not only there it is here, too, at our door."

DISCUSSION: (Mostly about C.V. Cottam's resolution.)

CAROL TARLEN said she's a writer and secretary but makes her living through the secretarial work. She is on her union's executive board and writes the union newsletter. She feels more oppressed as a woman than as a class. "Some members of the working class suffer from oppression more than others."

ALLEN COHEN: I feel this resolution is more divisive than the activity we've seen here for 2 days. I think that activity, that communication, that manifestation of differences is healthier than trying to say one aspect or concept is superior to another aspect or concept. I also want to say that I don't want any revolutionary council to tell me what or how to write . . . somebody writes about cocks and they're in jail; write about doorknobs, you're in jail; write about woman's rights, you might be in jail. I don't want a writer's union telling me that class is more important than sex, that class is more important than work, that one person is of one class if he makes so much money, or if he's closer to the means of production than another person. Everyone is suffering under a common restraint in the world today. That restraint is totalitarian control and the dehumanization of consciousness. To me the person who is a vice-president of General Motors is very likely as oppressed as a worker in a General Motors plant. (hisses and shouts of "No! No!" from others in room) Because he doesn't have any control. He may make \$100,000 a year and the worker might make \$40,000. Who is to say which class those two people are in, when they both can be blown up at any moment and turned into charcoal?"

WOMAN'S VOICE FROM AUDIENCE: . . . I think the word "subsidiary" (in the resolution) is going to be offensive to a large proportion of people in this conference, namely the radical gay people. If we are going to pioneer in this realm, we should take this into account. This is not challenging the premise that class is a basic foundation. Class should be wide enough to include and integrate and give a forum for these issues of sexual preference . . . I think we should discuss what class really means because the nature of the categories that the wage system produces and the nature of the work on the assembly line has got nothing to do with the kind of work we do as writers. The fact that we have to work to support ourselves is one of the ways we have to hook up with both realms . . . Even though I agree with your basic premise, I would not say that class membership determines you. I know working class people who have betrayed their class and I know people from the other class who have also betrayed theirs . . . We should address the nature of mercenary work, when you have to work to live and the nature of this semi-liberating work which is writing . . .

ANOTHER WOMAN: I can't sign this petition because I feel that the word "class" as he presented it is in the classic context which was formed by male, patriarchal thinking. Even though it grew as a counter-movement to that patriarchal feudal thinking, it is still defined in those terms and, as a woman, I can't accept that because I don't know what my class is. I don't know any woman who knows what her class is . . . This idea of unity and this idea of class has been presented by straight men. If they don't include in that concept the gay people and women and black people and ethnic people who are struggling, if they don't see their struggles as a part of that class struggle per se, then there is something wrong. That's the disunity. A gay person struggles against oppression—I don't care if they're making \$500,000 a year . . . If the white union working man can't accept that concept then there's something wrong with him and I can't accept his definition.

NORMAN MOSER: . . . The writers of America are not really workers. They're not interested in workers. They're not interested in ordinary people. They're not communicating with them, they're interested mostly in themselves, in their own damned egos. That's why we're not communicating with the other people out there . . . So we had better get that job done and stop using a lot of bullshit fancy words in our writing. Get down to the root of the matter—talk about what you really feel and think and stop just writing for your goddam Haight-Ashbury friends or your St. Mark's friends . . .

INEZ GOMEZ: . . . I am a woman Latina and I have suffered racism profoundly in this country . . . As a woman, as a Latina, I have found discrimination and, as a minority, I have found discrimination and minority women understand very well which class they belong to, because all of them belong to the

working class. It's no problem . . . when at Santa Clara University we have 3 or 5 Chicana faculty and the rest are cleaning the dorms and making the food in the cafeteria, it is very obvious where the working class is in Santa Clara University and other universities in this country and most of them are women, too. For us, it is very clear.

— transcribed and edited by Allen Cohen

Radical Asian American Writing Workshop

Spencer Nagasako, member of Bay Area Video Coalition
Vicky Gererao, Filipino feminist, draft counselor, activist for Japanese American
reparation and redress
Merle Woo, moderator, poet, member of Unbound Feet

Criticism and confrontation . . . For the self-proclaimed community realists in this workshop, these are the instruments for change to be used in writing and action. "We must write with a forward-looking vision," Merle Woo said. "If art has a social function, then in a decaying society we must show that change is possible and work toward (it)." Merle called for the radicalization of women and disbandment of capitalism and its supporting biases. Spencer Nagasako talked about the ritual seaweed harvests. Vicki Gererao spoke of her emergence from isolation inflicted by rape.

MERLE WOO began by reading her essay, "The Emergence of Feminist and Radical Writing in Asian America." She said:

"The view from the bottom is the most realistic. When personal lives are exposed through writing, they become the clearest, most comprehensive voice for collective action . . . If we voted for any of the three major presidential candidates last November we showed we don't believe we can affect change on our own. We are tragically (depending) on a capitalist system that must go on oppressing and exploiting us in order to survive."

The Asian writer must be an "accurate social historian," Woo said, so that Asian American history is not misconstrued. The Asian writer must confront the silences surrounding this history, tell the stories parents have chosen to forget. "Anything less than this," she said, "could lead to self-denial, cynicism and, ultimately, nihilism."

Woo emphasized the need for multi-issue politics to face the danger of today's right wing. She said the objective of mass media is "to dehumanize us, confuse (us), and perpetuate the stereotype that Asians are insidious and hostile." Discussing the seeming affront to minority groups, she said, "The ruling class doesn't have to organize on a conscious, deliberate level. It needs only to desire to maintain the status quo." She next explained the social position of women as a Feminist would to a non-Feminist and said: "We don't harbor contempt for our brothers and fathers but we do want change. If this (necessitates) criticism of men and of our culture then . . . It's healthy. How can it be divisive to want freedom for everyone?" She next quoted from Janice Mirikitani's story, "The Winner":

"Aunt Sumi would tell me to be refined and dignified, not to talk a lot and say the wrong things, not to smile too much. Only in silence will men imagine perfection. 'You must not show them that you are smart or that you long for anything else except the world they can give you.'"

To illustrate her sensitivity to the problems that Asian American men face, Merle told a story about her father's humiliation by police. She admitted she was ashamed of what she perceived then as his womanliness:

"When I was six, my father took me for a walk on Grant Avenue. Two white cops interrupted us, saying belligerently: 'Hey, fat boy, where's our meat' He left me standing there while he hurried to his store to get it. They kept complaining: 'That piece isn't good enough. Don't wrap it in newspapers.' I didn't know he spent a year and a half on Angel Island, that we could never have our right names, that he lived in constant fear of being deported and, like my mother, worked two full-time jobs most of his life. He was mocked and ridiculed because he speaks broken English."

Emasculation, Merle concluded, is a form of sexism and that and sex role stereotyping are of concern to both men and women. "The ruling class is a minority, but powerful. It keeps us divided through sexism, separatism, racism, nationalism and homophobia."

Finally Merle addressed the relationship between the poet and politics, defining politics with a quote from Seraphine Malacaquia:

"(It's) the outside forces and pressures that shape every human being on this planet. To face (political reality) as the factor that governs our lives is the necessary first step in the development of a consciousness that transcends an elitist concept of poetry. Poetry is the reflection of life and life is determined by politics."

Merle then talked about the theatrical collective Unbound Feet wherein members realized they weren't just individuals with unique, singular problems. "One of our major criticisms in the women's movement was separatism. We believe (seeing) men as the enemy is an obstacle to revolutionary change and smacks of biological determinism which (maintains) blacks are biologically inferior." She continued:

"Politics and writing cannot be divided. Every word we utter is a political act and every silence is a political stance. We cannot avoid the confrontation with our experience . . . And why? Because by isolating our experience (and assuming) we are individuals played on by unique, singular experiences



Merle Woo

and enclosed environments, we play into self-contempt, passivity, and despair, believing (it's) our fault we have no choices, that we aren't equal and don't have the right to be free. By being realists, rooted in our community experience, we can present a clear analysis and make those crucial connections that point to international unity."

Merle ended by reading Nellie Wong's poem "Give Me No Flowers."

SPENCER NAGASAKO said telling parents' stories was an important aspect of Asian American writing since "a lot of our parents can't speak English or, if they could, it was broken and they couldn't write it." Relating his generation to that of his parents, he read from his story, "Basketball and Nadi":

"Watching or playing, but mostly playing, hoop's a great game. Like it's a dance, an improv performance gig. Now I ain't talking about death or glory or being *numero uno*. I'm talking about that click in your head. A feeling of absolutely knowing what you're going to do next while absolutely not knowing at the same time."

He then discussed the dream of an "older dude" who played when "color determined NBA material, not skill." In the dream he's dribbling down court and "these two white dudes is chasing my ass and no matter how fast I goes, I can't get to the other end." To Spencer, the man's determination in the dream is like his parents' ritual seaweed harvest, performed despite social pressures to conform to a mainstream American culture:

"Every Spring, no matter what, my mom and pop cruise down to the beach to pick nadi. Knuckles start to bleed and patience (wears) thin when Pet yells for more rice sacks because "when all dried up, only get a little bit." . . . Fill five big tubs with H₂O an' dip, scrub, dip, scrub, dip, scrub. Stick some fine mesh chicken wire on the clotheslines and let the sun do its thing . . . And you can bet for the rest of the year the gohon tastes a whole lot finer with a little nadi on the side."

He concluded: "A sense of bluesy pride hits home. Someone's telling you in an indirect way you can't. But something clicks and says, 'Fuck it. I'm gonna do it anyways.'"

VICKY GERERAO spoke of being raped and the racist, sexist attitudes which left her to deal with "that night, and that man, alone."

"(I was) unable to tell my parents why I wanted to leave that dorm because I knew my father would kill and it would kill my mother. Before I knew it I was relating my nightmare to the administrative staff of the dorm. Eagerly, they soaked in the details . . . and righteously proclaimed that I should prosecute. But . . . I kept thinking of my small hometown, my father running for city councilman, the Filipino community filled with malicious gossipers, my parents losing face. There they were, four white women, telling me I was foolish for thinking about my family . . .

"He was so haughty that he turned to me in the hall and said, 'If you mention this to another woman, I'll sue you for slander.'"

DISCUSSION:

Someone asked Vicki if her parents responded the way she thought they would. She replied she hadn't told them yet. Discussion then focused on how she might tell them: leave the paper she'd just read on the table, write a letter, tell them face to face. One woman said that though Vicki might not get support from her parents, there were other groups to give support like the Left/Write Conference or readers of her work. Merle Wood said:

"Vicki's talking about making connections after the tremendous isolation she felt after the rape: the sexism in the family, the racism of the rape counselors, and (both) in the legal system. What do you do when you're faced with all that? Fight back. Start making connections with the community who will be hearing you."

A white man asked, "Where do I plug in (to fight racism)?"

Merle replied that the first step was to get educated, learn the history of Third World people in the U.S. and said, "You could be speaking out when someone makes a racist remark."

Another man said, "Whatever you write, if well done, would be understood by Anglos with any kind of sensitivity. That's the way you fight it."

Charles Belbin then talked about Carol Berge's poem "Chants for the West Coast" and said

he first felt it was satirical and bitter and reminded him of arguing with his uncle at family gatherings:

"It seems absurd (but) we used to argue whether black people were human beings. I later read in an essay by James Baldwin: 'I really have sympathy for people who argue at the dinner table about whether someone is a human being or not.' The bitterness you have against this completely mindless—I can't help (note) my uncle was once a West Virginia pig farmer—against this entrenched stupidity. It seemed to me Berge was speaking to people like my uncle (but) the objections that were brought up (to the poem) were very legitimate."

Wendy Rose noted that minority literature is seldom reviewed and that, as an Indian, she's often found her poetry shelved in the anthropology or juvenile section. She said Unbound Feet and the New York Third World Writer's Network were necessary because, otherwise, minority writers would be totally ignored. "We're always relegated to the special issue." She agreed with what Merle said about the necessity of Anglo readers reading and reviewing minority writers.

A Fresno writer asked, "How do you deal with a community that doesn't want to hear your stories?"

Nellie Wong responded that when her book, *Dreams*, came out in 1977 it was hardly noticed by her family until after a film she was in appeared, *Two Asian American Poets*. She continued:

In a project I almost got involved with in Oakland, (those) in charge didn't want to talk about gambling, the prostitution of Asian women, the exploitation of the working class. They just wanted to say, 'These are Chinese buildings in Chinatown and these are the entrepreneurs and fat cats.' They wanted to erase all that is a part of us . . . (Sometimes your words confront) things they haven't been able to face themselves. So don't write for your family. Asian Americans have to think about how much the family pulls us back. When it gets down to gut level political issues . . . then they can't deal with it.

"We are all ethnic minorities . . . (You don't have to be) guilty to be white . . . (but) remember that the working class is not *just* straight white male. It is all of us.

Suggested Reading: *Island, Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*, ed. by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, Judy Young (Hoc Doi, 1980).

— transcribed and edited by Paula Herbert

Political Impact of Lesbian & Gay Writing Workshop

Jeff Escoffier, editor of *The Socialist Review*, member of SF Lesbian & Gay History Project
Eric Garber, author of forthcoming book on lesbian and gay science fiction, member
of SFLGHP

Roberta Yusbah, member of SFLGHP

Amber Hollibaugh, *Socialist Review* editor, member of SFLGHP

Bruce Boone, moderator, essayist and author of *Century of Clouds*

JEFF ESCOFFIER opened by saying the workshop planned to focus on popular culture and its political implications as reflected in lesbian and gay writing. Placing this writing in a historical context, he said that while we must recognize that all forms of sexuality are natural, sexual desire is always shaped by each era's cultural and social forms, by its symbols, its poetry, its art. Homosexuality has always existed, but only in particular periods have there been assigned to homosexuals special identities solely based on sexuality; such identification has primarily occurred since the European industrial revolution, in capitalist environments.

This identity based on sexual desire, is not easily seen. Coming out is not only a process of identifying and accepting one's sexual desire but of identifying others. Sexual identity doesn't seem real until it's recognized by someone else, someone we love, someone who loves us. Homosexuality seeks its validity and its reality through its recognition. Lesbian and gay art existed even before gay sexual identities were consciously assigned. Earlier lesbian and gay writers often wrote outside of or without communities. Except for maybe the last 200 years in a few big cities, part of the struggle has been the struggle of writing outside of community.

But art has been particularly important to lesbian and gay artists in aiding this gay struggle of recognition, by helping identify who the community is. Art has served as a signal or message to those isolated in heterosexual society, as well as a vehicle for personal expression, development, and analysis. But art is also a disguise, and much gay writing is built around disguise. Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman each presented very gay images in their work, which, presented as art, allowed each to deny in public their own homosexuality: Wilde repeatedly in his trial, Whitman in his old age in letters to Carpenter and Symonds.

Only since the women's and gay movements has lesbian and gay literature moved away from this duality of conveying a message while simultaneously disguising it. This reluctance to use disguise—as, for instance, in the works of Rita Mae Brown and Kate Millet—seems to be the current stage of exploration for gay and lesbian writers.

ERIC GARBER talked about gay science fiction. Typical science fiction presents macho heroes upholding "the American way of life." Homosexuality enters the story only as one of the villain's more despicable aspects. A growing body of work by openly lesbian and gay writers takes the intrinsic naturalness of same-sex love for granted, while consciously working to create alternative visions of the future. The women's and gay movements have opened the way for self-identified gay visions unimaginable in the '30s and '40s. And they come from a wide variety of sources.

George Nadar, a '50s beef-cake star in grade-B movies drummed out of Hollywood for homosexuality, wrote a science fiction novel called *Chrome*. Laced with much gay male erotica, this otherwise-typical space-opera narrative teams up lovers Space Cadet Chrome and alien King Vortex in a fight against an authoritarian government. Marion Zimmer Bradley, often published in the '50s lesbian magazine *The Ladder*, is primarily known for her science fiction novels, the *Darkover* series. *Darkover*, a feudal world settled by earth colonies in the far future, develops a culture of physically-attuned people. The initial books in the series were standard fare and sexist, but beginning with *World Wreckers* in 1969, she changed tactics. She used hermaphrodites, and Amazons became dominant characters. Yet, she essentially treats male homosexuals as arrested adolescents who, if they don't grow out of it, become sinister. And a woman's role is still to have children. Nadar and Bradley have special self-identified gay visions, but they signify a '50s assimilationist politics, not radical solutions.

Some recent gay science fiction is separatist although more positive in gay and feminist themes. For instance, N.A. Diaman, a participant in this conference, has written two science fiction novels: the second, *Ed Dean Is Queer*, which foresees a future utopian San Francisco seceding from the Union. Elizabeth Lynn is best known for a trilogy, *The Chronicle of Tornor* which examines a feudal society changing from a patriarchy to a transformed culture with lesbian rulers. Other lesbians whose science fiction uses separatism as a part of their fantasies include Michele Singer's *The Demeter Flower*, Donna Young's *Retreat*, and Monique Wittig's *Les Guerilleres*. But the most notable is Sally Gearhart's *Stories from the Wonderground* which, in manuscript form, passed through the Bay Area lesbian community before publication. It details a future in which women have separated from men and form a nurturing rural culture.

Tom Disch exaggerates the present in horrifying dystopian fantasies. *334* takes place in a New York City housing project and has lesbian and gay characters. *On Wings of Song* is a hilarious Faustian search by a gay youth from the midwest.

Joanna Russ and Samuel Delaney, according to Garber, are the consummate political science fiction writers today. Russ' *The Female Man* sent shock waves throughout the science fiction field. Four women from four different planets who have dramatically different views of the relationship between men and women, are brought together. Russ' other science fiction novels include *We Who Are About To* and *The Two of Them*; she's also written a lesbian novel, *On Strike Against God*.

Delaney is gay and black. He wrote his first science fiction novel in 1962 at the age of 19 and was heralded as a wonder child. Soon after, he began writing a unique, eclectic style of science fiction associated with the then-emerging "New Wave" genre. His novel *Triton* presents a future in which homophobia is anachronistic and in which anyone's sexuality can easily be "re-oriented." His most recent work, a series of short stories called *Tales of Niverson*, is the closest he comes to examining pure political science fiction. In a future in which the economy changes from a barter to a money one, he imagines how this change affects relationships between men and women.

ROBERTA YUSBAB, talking about paperback lesbian romances, said she became a collector of these after visiting the New York City lesbian archives several years ago. Published between 1950 and 1965, these drugstore paperbacks with titles like *Women in the Shadows* and *Twilight Lovers*, set in Greenwich Village and other centers of lesbian life were mainly written by women, though sometimes by men, often under women's pseudonyms.

Historically important as a reflection, however distorted, of the growing visibility of post-World War II lesbian communities about which we have little information, they were often more truthful and positive about lesbians than most of the hardcover lesbian novels written in the past decade, and certainly better able to escape the pressures of publishers to have heterosexual endings. Most have happy endings, with the women together; they are, however, characterized by a certain amount of contradiction or duality. "These are wonderful and terrible ones: even the good ones are wonderful and terrible. But so were the '50s and early '60s for lesbians," Roberta said. Social life was exciting and San Francisco bars packed; but alcoholism was high, McCarthy supporters and local vice squads active.

In the novels written by lesbians, the love scenes are passionate and tender, yet personal relations have a fair amount of emotional and physical violence. In the male-authored books clearly written to titillate men, the sex scenes have no relation to homosexuality. Unpleasant and sometimes brutal sex scenes between lesbians and straight men suggest familiar neo-Freudian ideologies; for example, you were a lesbian because you were raped. Seen in another light, sexual contact with men was at best unpleasant for the lesbian character simply because she wasn't interested and went with men out of guilt.

Some of the duality was the result of compromise with editors who wanted more sex, violence and dramatic scenes. Ann Banner, probably the most famous writer of lesbian pulps, admitted in a 1961 article in *One*: "I have made some concessions, minor ones having to do with temper tantrums or chase scenes, rather than sex, because it has been pictured to me by my editors as a vital selling point." In the same article Banner also wrote that most homosexuals "lead rather quiet lives, work hard enough, and try to maintain a little discretion on the home front. But that doesn't sell books."

Writers such as Banner received much mail from readers, mostly lesbians and women wanting to come out. At a time when the lesbian community and reliable information were hidden, these books offered help and knowledge. Lesbian authors took advantage of the emerging interest in lesbianism to present sympathetic packaging, yet many managed to write truthfully about the excitement of loving other women. The covers always had two feminine-looking women: one dark-haired, the other blonde, suggesting the stereotype of the dark, evil woman (the lesbian) seducing the blonde, virtuous and innocent. Although the contents are about butches and fems, and directed largely to women, the covers were designed to attract straight men, who are not attracted to butches.

Most of the characters in the pulp novels work for a living, clearly as a necessity. Many are office workers in publishing, advertising and theatrical agencies in New York. Others are retail clerks and stock girls. They are the fems. The butches have jobs where they can wear slacks—elevator operators, delivery truck drivers. Women were doing these kinds of jobs at a time when women were supposed to leave the work force, feed the post-war repressive ideology of suburban home, family, and breadwinner husband. But lesbians couldn't leave work and expect to be supported by a husband. In the novels, the lesbians—the Lauras, the Beths, and Kims—narrowly avoid losing their jobs, not because of fear of discovery or incompetence, but more often from the strain of living a double life.

Bars figure predominately in these novels, sometimes ambivalently, but usually as safe, comfortable places. Here's Artemis Smith's impression of a Greenwich Village bar from her 1959 novel, *The Third Sex*:

Joan felt safe as soon as she walked in. The Sundial was noisy and smoke-filled but with happy noise and smoke. A great feeling of relief came over Joan as she looked around. There were attractive women here like herself. Some very feminine and most of them her own age. All races seemed to be comfortable in this place without any sort of segregation. Black next to white, sometimes coupled, and each shade attractive.

The novels' plots are dramatic and romantic, the main characters intensely emotional and introspective, perhaps influenced by the tradition of popular romantic paperbacks, like Harlequin Romances. Unlike more respectable lesbian novels where sex is rarely mentioned or described, these pulps are marked by their sexual openness; sex is depicted as satisfying, loving, and passionate. For instance, in William Michaels' 1963 novel, *The Twisted Years*:

Wordlessly we fell into each other's arms. I had waited so long for this, yearned for it with such intensity. It was everything I wanted. It was as if I had never before made love. She raised me to heights never before experienced. Passionate flows ebbed and flowed in endless stormy rhythms. When the unnatural light of dawn intruded we broke, sated. Birds called to each other. Together, yet separately, we slept.

Roberta concluded by saying these types of books may be located through bibliographies like Barbara Grier's *The Lesbian in Literature* and in the Arno Press reprints in most large libraries.

AMBER HOLLIBAUGH, the last panelist to speak, pointed out that there's a continual thread of gay male writing reflecting a gay male sensibility, but almost a total lack from Sappho to Stein of any explicit lesbian imagery written by women. This is so, she explained, because if lesbianism is perceived as a highly sexual act, and women are perceived as highly unsexual, in a culture that refused to acknowledge female sexuality at all, then the dissemination of lesbian imagery has to be suppressed to maintain that culture's concept of female nature.

If women aren't supposed to be sexual except as men's whores, there's no room for the concept of women having physical desire for other women. Since women don't carry inside themselves the sexual image, not having any experience of it in their lives, then there's no way to create a sexual image, nothing internal to externalize. And no culture, except possibly a distant and semi-mythological island, exemplified lesbians. With sexual issues hidden from them, and not being able to represent their own desire in their own bodies, relationships, and community contexts, women could not therefore represent physical desire in their writing. So they were only able to represent in literature the romantic "search for love." In this search, any sexual desire one woman might admit having for another was explained as something evil and exterior to herself, perhaps devil-inspired.

Amber believes the pulps come closest to exploring lesbian desire, although some exploration occurs in books such as Radcliff Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. But here again, lesbianism is like a

mental illness visited upon the heroine, who is unable to halt or control it. She was a man in a woman's body, so in a funny way, lesbians frequently have been more transsexual than lesbian. To this day, little that's sexually explicit is written about lesbianism, even among lesbian writers. There are more love scenes, but they don't tell much about the desire lesbians have and why they have it. Few ways to analyze and explore lesbian desire exist because few opportunities for lesbians to self-actualize themselves exist.

How female sexuality gets replayed and explored by women thus become a political question in current writing. Not until now has there been a culture that could support such explorations. The next decade will possibly see the amazing explosion of different ways of perceiving and actualizing sexuality among women, if the fears of such explorations by the New Right in the publishing industry don't eradicate them. "Lesbians have barely begun to articulate their own sexuality," Amber concluded. "When we talk about political issues that face us and the ways sexuality affects us, we have to keep in mind that we may have a hard time defending how sexuality is a political issue."

In the following discussion, some of the audience expressed disappointment that the political impact of the lesbians and gays at the conference wasn't being addressed in the workshop. A woman who believed "our responsibility here should be to define how to provide leadership in the Left" asked two questions: "How can I as a lesbian speak to world issues beyond being defined by my sex and sexuality? How do we organize ourselves here in this room and in the community to make a political impact?"

A man who affirmed that "for straight men to change the quality of men's lives, they must subsume and integrate lesbian and gay concerns into a unified left" was opposed by a woman who expressed her lack of faith in such an effort by the straight Left, citing the American Left's refusal in the early part of the century to espouse the rights of women to control their own bodies, abdicating that battle to middle-class liberals. She strongly asserted that we must not give up the issue of our sexuality. Another man said that an important lesson he'd learned from the feminists was that the "personal is political, a lesson the Left doesn't fully understand."

Several people voiced a feeling that sexuality was the most divisive issue to be faced by the conference. A woman named Teresa said, "Raw nerves are being touched at this conference. Much unacknowledged sexuality is present and our focusing in on it increases its volatility. What we do makes straight people look at what they do."

David Steinberg, who had denounced the homophobic comments of several of the panel speakers in that morning's session, reaffirmed what he had said, even though it might be divisive in a Unity Conference. He was angry, frustrated, and felt such a confrontation was necessary, he said. He received much support from the workshop for his action.

Amber, for one, thanked him and explained the situation had been intolerable for her sitting on that panel. She pointed out that lesbians and gay men had a great deal of input and impact on the organizing and unfolding of the conference and that at least one-third of the audience was gay; and yet Diane DiPrima had accused gays of being non-political. Amber said she was not only shocked to hear homophobic statements, but to hear them in the same forms and words she'd heard for years. She wondered if she and Judy Grahn's appearance on the panel had been tokenism but did feel their presence was powerful and profound. At a similar conference in 1934, neither of them could have been heard, neither probably would have Nellie Wong. She thought it odd that sexuality and the Soviet Union were the cutting edges of the conference and felt, therefore, gays and lesbians needed to rethink their relationships to the Left. Amber was more convinced now than ever we have to maintain autonomous movements or we'd be lost.

Another woman pointed out that women's and lesbian's literature can be a powerful tool in putting their sexuality in a larger context, one of which is how do they get absolute control of their bodies, when they live in a culture where men control them and keep information from them.

Bruce Boone, one of the conference steering committee members, next cautioned the audience not to be too discouraged. He explained that he and Steve Abbott, "two faggots," had conceived the conference and got it going, that they had both "been through a lot for nine months with some of the coordinating committee who are outright sexist and homophobic." It got so bad there were times when he wanted to drop out but he didn't. He felt the conference was historic because gays and lesbians had actually raised issues, not just through the intermediary of other people, but by themselves. He agreed with Amber that lesbians and gays were the cutting edge of the conference.

Noting that lesbians and gays were probably the biggest caucus in the entire conference, he felt "we should make ourselves heard in the upcoming plenary session and continue afterward with some kind of permanent gay caucus."

Bruce also emphasized non-gay support in the workshop, especially from the Latino community and said: "We should keep in mind how crucial our support of other people's struggles is, particularly Third World struggles, while not in any way minimalizing our own."

Tede Matthews said: "We no longer have to decide if we can be gay and Left. The revolution needs us." He stressed the need to develop feminist and gay presses "to bring out our history, to arm us with the knowledge of our past as a revolutionary tool so we can be given our legitimate context, so we can't be seen as something just pulled out of the air."

— transcribed and edited by Calvin Doucet

Workshop On Criticism As A Political Tool

Al Richmond, former editor of *People's World* and author of *Long View From the Left*
Mirtha N. Quintanales, anthropologist, writer, political activist
Richard Irwin, poet and columnist in performance art for *Damage*
Seve Abbott, moderator

AL RICHMOND: The two themes I want to develop are mass culture and alternative culture. By mass culture I don't mean culture emanating from the masses but that disseminated to them from the mass media. These two cultures reflect a dual process of revolutionary transformation that, on the one hand, demolish and, on the other hand, construct. The painful problem regarding mass culture is to take on what is disseminated by the mass media; the counterculture attempts to create an alternative culture.

In the cultural arena you encounter the prejudices, attitudes and values that both reflect society as it is and attempt to reinforce partial acceptance of this society. This is thus a crucial arena in the battle to change people's thinking because you're doing it in terms that are popularly understood. You confront these prejudices and attitudes. Your criticism must be as good as the work of those who've created whatever you're criticizing. It's vital that you are able to do this in *popular* terms. The problem is getting some kind of sectarian, supposedly-Marxist analysis but not communicating to the kind of mass audience that was being influenced by the mass culture. Most important is the job of equipping your readership with insights that enable them to communicate more effectively with their fellow workers, neighbors or whoever it is outside. This is a very important function of a critic of the Left.

Regarding the counterculture, the greatest danger is the approach "these people are on our side." These are "our people" and they'll support without criticism, with an almost-blind enthusiasm, everything that comes "from our side." This isn't helpful because criticism can be a very valuable form of support. This approach doesn't help the artist, writer or performer to perfect their art and you are abdicating your responsibility as a critic by simply hailing them because they're doing "good things" and leave it go at that.

The final thing to consider (and we've made some advances here in recent years) is the nature

of politics. Politics isn't just opinion. Politics isn't simply a one-to-one reflection of economics. What truly goes into politics is the sum total of attitudes that people have acquired through economic and political education from the cultural arena. One of the challenges facing those who desire revolutionary transformation is the creation of an alternative culture that not only *presents* the conditions of an alternative society based on a different set of values, but also *inspires* those forces that would be the creators of such a society with the confidence in their ability to lead society or to assert their "ingenuity" in society. I don't mean simply in terms of presenting different political programs but a different culture with all that goes into culture in terms of values, attitudes, morality and interpersonal relationships. We must use criticism as a weapon to encourage in every way possible the creation of this counterculture which presents not only an alternative vision of society but inspires those who can create that society with a confidence in their own capacity.

MIRTHA QUINTANALES: I understand this workshop's been organized to explore positive means of pooling our resources as writers for political purposes. To me this meant looking at criticism as a tool for building something and I interpret this to mean as a tool for consciousness raising. From my own experience as a student of social movements, especially as a third world radical feminist, I've become convinced that criticism was not something I found to be helpful. In many cases it seemed to be an extremely divisive tool for silencing. So I didn't see criticism as a tool, I consistently saw it as a weapon (of oppression). In terms of what you were saying about culture and counterculture, I see the counterculture very much a part of the mass culture. We've become locked in this ongoing complicity with the system that's oppressing us. To me, it's part of the same culture and is difficult to transcend.

I am particularly interested in the role of ideology. As an anthropologist who's spent time doing work around political anthropology, I became very interested in the issue of legitimacy. Mostly it's defined as morally binding principles that are shared by members, or potential members, of a political system or movement. These binding moral principles are very diffuse but very powerful in that they don't require any immediate reaction. So if we think of them as a force binding these people together then it doesn't have the same power and legitimacy of the values that are shared together.

Ideology, as I understand it, is a set of ideals or goals or purposes that enable members of a particular group to interpret the past, explain the present, and formulate visions of the future. We go to our roots and try to explain how it is that we are managing now, and how we can create some vision of the future.

A lot of what I've studied and looked at as criticism is a kind of reaction to the ideology of the majority within the women's movement. I find that that reaction keeps women outsiders. The women's movement is factionalized into different groups with different concerns. People who are outside the mainstream (eg: white upper class or middle class women) do have to deal with it. In order for me to say who I am, or proceed, or to do my writing, I have to continuously refer myself to the mainstream feminist culture.

I wouldn't say criticism has no place—obviously I have to be able to define myself and identify the forces of oppression in the movement—but I feel we need other means of looking at our prophecies and our political development. I've found the most important thing to deal with, speaking as a third world feminist, is two ongoing prophecies. One is stereotyping and the other is omission. We have to create the kind of structures that will allow people to speak. Local writing, political writing needs to be given room for really looking at the internal and external validity of any piece of literature. Does it hang together? Does it make sense? What does it have to do with the reality of the people to whom it is directed? I think a lot of criticism doesn't do that. A lot of criticism, especially political criticism, takes ideological positions. There's no dialogue. One says, "This is my politics." And the other says, "No, this is my politics." And there's no exploration of who we *all* are and what our values are. What are our goals? What are our visions?

PERSON FROM AUDIENCE: Several things came up while you were talking that I've run into as an artist. Either the content is correct and the form is not, or the form is correct and the content is not. There's been a thirty to forty-year struggle in the Left art community about how ideology affects art, particularly regarding social realism, whatever that is, in relation to the suppression of other art movements such as the avant-garde in the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1934 when, for socialist writers, realism became the approved art form. I see this still happening on the left and would like some response from the panel on that.

MIRTHA QUINTANELES: You can identify where a person's coming from politically by the content and the form. I work from that perspective, I think we all do, but some of us may be more deeply aware of such facts than others. The fact that I consider myself a radical feminist is going to influence what I do. I'm aware of it but it's not god-given. I'm aware that it's different from someone who defines themselves differently but I like it better. I think we need to be critical of our own values, visions and goals without the fear that we have to change them.

STEVE ABBOTT: I went through ten years of academic training to be a critic and what that did to my creative writing was cripple it. The categories given in which to consider literature and film were irrelevant, or worse, deceptive about social relations. What I try to do now in critical writing, either for *Poetry Flash* or other publications, is explain how a work functions. What it is doing or not doing. What traditions does it come from. What's its relations to society. But I would hope not to valorize a particular mode such as realism.

Sometimes a writer just needs support, the kind of critical feedback that will inspire you to go forward. At another time you need to separate your ego from your work and see how your work functions technically. I think it's good for all creative writers to do some criticism because it allows you to look at your own work differently.

RICHARD IRWIN: I want to read a few things. A piece called "Occupy The Brain", and from my last article, "It was so primitive and ritualistic." Let me start out with this piece here. This is by Bruce Galot.

"Using conventions as music, painting, writing, drawing, object-making, photography, motion picture-making, video taping, dance as productions of sensory awareness in order to produce an intelligentsia of activity allows an opportunity to explore the social demands of a person, group, community, a world, a universe. It is those individuals, involved in collaborative premediation, that produce revolution around the process of creativity. This is the way the confines of social presumption, arising from the recognition of the structure, confuses a desirable attempt to use collaborative power to make, instead, individual patterns prominent. When there is public disillusion there is subsequently: (1) A break in the power of the media, and (2) A crack in mass communications through the loss of belief."

(At this point, a film was being shown on the wall, a slide show was being projected onto the ceiling, and 4x5 reproductions of billboard art were being passed around.)

An unhealthy dose of militaristic politics both east and west has created a milieu of transfigured decadence, lunatic humor and bizarre behavior that defies American Tradition. It is an encircled phenomena with its roots in dada, futurism of fascist Italy, constructivism of revolutionary Russia, surrealism, nihilism, anarchism and film noir of Hollywood in the thirties. The scatological outbursts of artists, poets, free thinkers, radicals, and musicians combine with the shock waves of world war and the existential dilemma of Europe during the '20s and '30s might be what we are expecting in this subculture today.

"Social Darwinism applied to art ignores simultaneous mini-states of evolution/de-evolution, so that the time bomb of art explosion ends in a series of isms. Like waves in a vortex ascribed to a big bang theory is merely a capitalized view of western apocalypse. I favor discrete autonomous plurals of activity capable of animation in any given time space. Archetypes appearing and disappearing like phantoms in both the individual and collective psychic phenomena. Surrealism, equal to a specific state of psychic activity, is paralleled to but not necessarily connected to similar activity to what Jung called the collective unconscious. As technology improves communications from point A to point Z between individuals and nation states, the universal spread increases the tempo, producing an elastic state capable of rapid transformation. The threat of fascism, a self-distraction, also improves as well as the options for adversion. The media-crafts are in charge. They control the volume, blur the image and influence the future—that genetic blackboard. Video art, I should say television, the great gothic monster of totalitarian capitalism, like a baby in the invisible theater stamping its mad feet in the living rooms of our brave new world. Not structured for long narratives or pan environments like cinema, video art works best with short repetitive statements and visuals that overpower the viewers."

MAN IN AUDIENCE: I'm having trouble with exactly what the discussion is, about what we mean by criticism and who we're criticizing in what way. Criticism in Hollywood newspapers is one thing, criticism of progressive writers by other progressive writers is another. This conference is concerned about the rise of the Right, the rise of the danger of war. In all our writing, and in criticism in



Example of billboard art - photo courtesy of Bruce Galot

particular, we play a role, both in all our writing, and in criticism in particular we play a role both in terms of struggling for ourselves and in terms of criticising the bourgeois form of perceiving. How do we play a role in terms of building this kind of unity to resist what's coming down?

JOE SAFDIE: I really agree with you, especially about criticism of each other. progressive writers criticizing other progressive writers. I think that especially among poets we've gotten very lazy in the last twenty or thirty years. The lack of audience has made us think that because nobody is reading us anyway we can do anything we want in our writing. I came out of a scene in Boulder where a lot of writers we grew up on, including Allen Ginsberg, are now saying the democratic experiment is dead and that the Buddhist experience and monarchy is now. I've just started a magazine called *Zephyr* dedicated to making the politics of literature apparent.

WOMAN IN THE BACK: What you said expresses what I wanted to say. I came here with an idea of sharpening my brain a little bit so I'd be able to speak and retaliate to people who go for all the garbage thrown at them in the media. I've gotten so I don't read criticism and he said it was like it was criticism of a progressive by a progressive. it was an interaction. It doesn't have that harshness, like criticism where you are smashing it down. Also, I wonder if I understood Al Richmond when he was talking about subculture. Did you mean, for instance, that the gay community could change society, or that the threat of this could change society?

AL RICHMOND: No, I was talking of the need for the creation of a counterculture. Not that segmented. In my terms it would be primarily a working class culture that presents an alternative to the culture of the incumbent society. While I have the floor I'd like to answer the question that was asked earlier. I don't believe that any ideology should dictate form. As far as form is concerned, I think there ought to be total freedom for creative artists who experiment with form and work at it. The responsibility of the critic, I think, is to recognize that any bit of creative art, whether it is literature, painting, etc. is simply an individual expression of that particular artist who creates it, but also a social phenomena. I don't think everybody has to conform to a specific formula in their creative efforts. I think that is stultifying and ultimately destructive. I think there ought to be competition.

RICHARD IRWIN: When I said that I criticized things totally subjectively, I meant I don't believe in having a pre-arrived-at ideological stance. I attempt to be aware in my own work, in my own writing, of what it is I'm saying. I feel perfectly responsible for every word, so knowing there is an audience, knowing that someone is going to be reading this, has an ethical sense. That is why I say it's an ethical sense I develop, that all of us develop, as writers, as human beings. It's an ethical sense.

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: When I was studying literature in the '60s, the predominate mode of criticism was called the New Criticism in which one analyzed the text without consideration of reality outside the text. That method of criticism has since faded or at least been proven somewhat bankrupt. My point is that, although it became evident to some of us who were studying literature, that this was an inadequate approach to the work, it is a useful tool for us, as critics, to be able to appropriate some of the rigorous attention to any given document or statement whether it is one we make here or it comes from General Haig, Reagan or any number of people. In that regard, some of the techniques of the New Criticism that I find somewhat irrelevant, not irrelevant, but limiting. In political terms, if we apply those methods to what we hear on a day-to-day basis, or in advertising and political statements, they can be very useful in disclosing contradictions. We shouldn't automatically reject a mode of critical approach just because it has been proven a politically bankrupt approach. It may have relevance in our situation.

WOMAN: I think we have to stop ourselves somewhere. I just see the presentations, what you have shown so ineffectively . . . that was the real message to me rather than what you were trying to show us. I felt it was insensitive.

RICHARD IRWIN: There is a real question about that. I appreciate what you are saying, although it was unintentional. The intention was, well, sometimes in the rush to incite an alienation takes place.

MAN A: I just want to say that sooner or later there comes a point when you have to have a point of view an ideology. We are all very divided. If the Left came to power today, took over the government and economy, I think things would fall apart. We are so divided that . . . we see images on television, for example, that have subliminal messages showing, for instance, black people as unequal and women as sex objects. When one protests against this, do you make a film, like what we saw here which wasn't a film but a bunch of random images that didn't mean anything, or do you rebel against all that and have some kind of ideology and make something that means something?

MAN B: I would like to have a definition of working class. Has there been a definition of the working class at the conference?

VOICE: Those that work.

MAN B: Everybody that works?

VOICE: What happens to the unemployed, when there are so many unemployed?

VOICES: Yeah! They get lost.

AL RICHMOND: People who have to earn their living by selling their ability to work.

VOICE: Whether it's a typewriter or a laser.

MAN A: And sooner or later the whole idea of criticism or counterculture is to change things. The way to change society. So many of us have assumed that we are going to be the losers forever, that we'll sit back there and nag, wrestle a few concessions out of the government as a holding action. Sooner or later we got to get the idea that we are going to take power over the government and economy. Somehow that idea has got to be behind everything that we do.

WOMAN: The question that has been bothering me for the last couple of days that I don't think we even got close to, except in this last session, is that, since we on the Left are always very individualistic and we don't want to be trapped in any stultifying ideology, is how do we work or fight against those in this country that don't fear being stultified? How do we on the Left maintain what we believe in and, at the same time, oppose and actively form an opposition against the kind of thing like the Moral Majority where the people who don't give a shit about individualism and just follow this line and more? How do we move against it, and retain our individualism and work against this at the same time?

DAVID MOE: I have an answer to that. We need a greater common denominator.

WOMAN: Right! What is it?

DAVID MOE: Well, one of the common denominators is ecology and to overcome death. Death is a greater common denominator than profit. The reason capitalism is powerful is because they

have very simple primitive exercises in which they reduce human beings to be motivated by profit. Anybody without an education can go—if they think like Caligula—cut everybody's head off. This solves economics. This is how capitalism captures the psyche. The Leftists need a greater common denominator, a greater common humanistic denominator in order to overcome the common denominator of profit. As long as they have divisive common denominators that divide people up in all their different ways, then capitalism will keep on with their simple formula.

ERICA HUNT: In answer to the question of how our individualistic orientations can work in his world, and how we can work on the Left, I think it is by doing something very similar to what we are doing today which is people coming from very, very different places: ecology, whole-life movements, art performance movements, language-centered movements, anti-language-centered movements—and all being represented in a very pluralistic kind of meeting trying to see what kind of common denominators we might have. If we can't get together on that immediately, that's all right. The second thing that I'm interested in is what Mirtha was saying, and no one has really addressed it. The idea of literary criticism. How do you generate new cultural values, new criteria for judging a work of art, or for saying how much does that work of art represent a populace, or not even a populace, a community interest, a community aesthetic? How does that further some community interest, some community activity such as literature, a strand of history coming from a body of literature, or a body of art work?

This presentation (the film shown by Richard Irwin) worked for me on the level of taking very familiar types of visual images and systematically distorting them so you notice them and they are not just there on the landscape. In the same way, in literature, there are certain habits we have in writing, so that we write and presume a certain order of relations in our sentences, in our paragraphs, in our compositions, in our essays that are, in fact, relationships that come from a bourgeois oppression, or aristocratic, elitist or alienating ways of looking at the world.

— transcribed and edited by Ken Weichel

Appendix: Resolutions Passed or Defeated at Plenary Session

1. **Writers' Union Resolution:** Resolved, that the Left Write Conference form a writers' union; that this writers' union be organized under principles of unity in support of peace, political and economic democracy, self-determination and international solidarity among the working peoples of the world; that we stand united against fascism, imperialism, racism, sexism, homophobia and agism; that this writers' union be set up as a democratically run organization in which existing writers' organizations and individual writers can associate and form new projects; that these projects could include: a publication, study groups and workshops; activist groups; a writers' rights defense group; a writer/publisher arbitration board; and a switchboard for linking writers and progressive organizations. — Proposed by Steering Committee. *Passed unanimously.*
2. ... That the Left Write Steering Committee set aside any portion of unused conference money to publish an edited transcript of conference proceedings. *Proposed by Steve Abbott. Passed unanimously.*
3. ... That we pass the hat for (anti-imperialist struggle in) El Salvador. *Proposed by Clare Strawn for African People's Solidarity Committee. Passed unanimously. (\$175.36 collected and given to Casa El Salvador.)*
4. ... That the conference advise San Francisco Supervisors, the California Governor and Legislature, and the U.S. President and Congress to recommend and initiate negotiations with the U.S.S.R. for a bilateral halt to nuclear testing, bomb production and missile placement as a first step to nuclear disarmament. *Proposed by Allen Cohen. Passed.*
5. ... That the conference adopt and publicize a position against attacks on women, gays, people of color and workers in the mass media (and that writers) destroy stereotypes which have been a basis for the continuing exploitation of oppressed peoples. *Proposed by the Committee for a Revolutionary Socialist Party, Freedom Socialist Party, and Radical Women. Passed.*
6. ... That (all left writers struggle against) racism, sexism, class oppression and homophobia, freely and openly discussing our differences, (using) our work in the common fight against the right-wing. *Proposed by Women Writers Union and Women's Workshop. Passed.*
7. ... That the conference support Clara Fraser in civil liberties and political ideology discrimination suit, *Clara Fraser vs. Seattle City Light. Proposed by Radical Women. Passed.*
8. ... That a Reporters Caucus be established in Writers Union to counter right-wing ideology in mass media and to develop a means to use electronic media for truthful ends. *Proposed by C.T. Hall. Passed.*
9. ... That conference support Amiri Baraka and recommend his sentence be reduced to parole. *Passed unanimously.*
10. ... That we can best achieve unity and fight effectively against racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. by basing our struggle on what we have in common as members of the working class and by recognizing that our primary oppressor is capitalism. *Proposed by R.V. Cottman. Not passed.*
11. ... That conference recognize and declare that, due to historical forces, the proper leadership of the International Left has passed from Russia and China to the colonies of advanced capitalist nations where the contradictions inherent in capitalism are most accentuated and which are thus generating the most advanced theory and practice. *Proposed by Charles Upton. Not passed.*
12. ... That the publication of conference transcripts be prefaced by this quote from Bertolt Brecht: "Everything or nothing; All of us or none." *Proposed by John Mueller. Passed.*
13. ... That the conference endorse the Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day demonstration in June, 1981 and form a Left Write Contingent in support of gay rights and against the New Right. *Proposed by Tede Matthews. Passed.*
14. ... That the conference send telegrams in support of Pancho Aguila, Tommy Trantino, Leonard Peltier, Geronimo Pratt, Dessie Woods and Chelsea Lee to governors of states holding these individuals. *Proposed by Kush. Passed.*

15. ... That Left Write set up an international translation network between revolutionary poets here and abroad, that contemporary revolutionary poets be included in any Left Write journal, that all translators celebrate in word and deed International Women's Day on March 8 as the first international celebration on the Left Write agenda. *Proposed by Jack Hirschman and the Translation Workshop. Passed.*
16. ... That the conference Steering Committee set up a tape network and make tapes of the conference available to all neighborhoods by making copies available to radio stations. *Proposed by Kush. Passed.*
17. ... That the conference support Amnesty International and help with letters and protest art to rally support for all people and writers who are jailed and tortured by any government. *Proposed by David Moe. Not passed.*

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