

acted upon, moved, and impressed by other women.⁸⁹

The concepts of 'duty' and 'obligation' do not represent lesbian connection. Obligation does not measure lesbian caring and network. Duty is not the essence of our connection, nor is it the reason we are lesbians. Lesbians do not come together out of duty, nor does obligation hold us together as lovers, friends, collectives, or community. And neither duty nor obligation will hold us together over time in a way that we become an energy field capable of resisting oppression.

I am suggesting that duty and obligation are not part of Lesbian Ethics. And I am also suggesting that caring, while not the sort of energy that can be forced or guaranteed, nevertheless comprises the heart of lesbian connection.

Integrity and Agency

I HAVE BEEN trying to develop an ethics relevant to lesbians under oppression, one which avoids both blaming the victim and victimism. We do not control situations, we act in them. We are here now, and what we do has made and will continue to make a difference. Whatever limits we face, our power lies in understanding that, and so in choice.

I also want an ethics which honors and embraces our lesbian spirits. I am interested in that essence, that agency, through which we began rejecting the norms of heterosexualism. As Julia Penelope notes:

If there's one thing that all lesbians have in common, it's the ability to say "no" to coercion. Tell a lesbian not to do something, and she'll turn right around and do it. That's the essence of the lesbian. (JEB calls it our "bad attitude.")⁹⁰

We are an obnoxious, unruly bunch. And so an ethic that suits us is not going to be one which functions to keep us in line. An ethic that suits us is one which will provide fertile ground for the development of our lesbian being.

By coming out, we have been able to break at some level from the dominant ideology and so, in certain respects, we have exhibited the capacity for being solitary, independent, self-reliant, and aggressive. But what we broke to was a connecting with other lesbians. Our desire has been, not to remain solitary and independent, but to connect, to pool our resources, and to build something which makes real our dreams and what we imagine.

And so I also want an ethics that embraces plurality, not uniformity, one which locates us in relationship to each other where we gain perspectives and develop interactively. As autokoenoous beings, we are individ-

uals in ■ context; this in turn makes it possible for us to develop the complexity of lesbian meaning. We both create and are created by lesbian community.

So I have called for a moral revolution. In the process I have challenged the concepts of 'altruism', 'self-sacrifice', 'unconditional loving', 'vulnerability', 'paternalism', 'protection', 'safety', 'reason' over and against 'emotions', 'self-control', 'privacy of feelings', 'praise and blame', 'accountability', 'justice', 'duty', and 'obligation', arguing that all involve power as control and thus are not part of Lesbian Ethics. So what, then, is ethics about?

In my opinion, the heart of ethical focus, the function of ethics, and what will promote lesbian connection, is enabling and developing individual integrity and agency within community. I have always regarded morality, ideally, as a system whose aim is, not to control individuals, but to *make possible*, to encourage and enable, individual development.

Integrity

Ethics need not lie with laws, avoidance of error, nor group interest or self-interest. My concern with ethics is not in bargaining or juggling or calculating interactions to secure either justice ideally or social control practically. All those considerations, together with considerations of principle and duty in traditional ethics, tend to shortchange or even bypass individual integrity and agency because, in a sense, they presuppose antagonism and so nourish it.

The modern tradition in anglo-european ethics starts with egoistic strangers and then works to devise a set of values that will get them to "cooperate." Its focus is regulation or conformity and coercion ("cooperation").

The ethics I am moving toward begins with those who have resisted, at some level, that "cooperation" and who have refocused. It starts with those who live under oppression. It starts with those who have a sense of desiring connection, who move toward each other. It starts with those who have many differences and who also have a ground on which to learn from those differences; thus it starts with those can find the richness with which to tolerate the contradictions that must necessarily (in our generations) appear.

By acknowledging a starting point different from that of modern anglo-european ethics, we find that different questions come into focus, for example: how to survive and resist patriarchy, including patriarchal privilege; how to avoid de-moralization; how we go on in situations which we do not control and among others whose agendas don't always match ours; how to address different boundaries; how we develop the ability to attend; how we gain perspective and understanding from each other; what works among us and what seems not to; how we individually and collec-

tively create value. And all of this is connected with lesbian integrity and lesbian agency.

The concept of 'integrity' is problematic, for one meaning of 'integrity' is "a rigid adherence to a code of behavior." This is not what I invoke when I talk of integrity.⁹¹ I invoke, rather, a concept of wholeness. Janice Raymond argues that 'integrity' means a whole "from which no part can be taken."⁹²

Lesbians are a deeply wounded people as a result of oppression, and each carries in her ■ violence capable of devastating others when she perceives herself as being backed into a corner. In suggesting that the focus of lesbian ethics be integrity and agency, I am suggesting we can start with where each is—rather than trying to force some idea of where we should be—and concern ourselves with what enables us to develop our moral agency. The changes that have come and those that will come, come from the heart. And they come in each lesbian's own time—as she is able and ready—not on someone else's schedule.

The bloodroot collective writes:

We want to create a context where women can make vital connections: the careful weaving and mending which must be done on a daily basis, so that we and other women can begin to heal ourselves and our sense of wholeness. To hold on to some part of the truth of our lives and to have the strength of conviction to continue: this is our challenge.⁹³

Focusing on integrity means acknowledging our selves, which in no way is equivalent to regarding our selves as fixed or unchanging. It means proceeding from self-understanding and developing that understanding through attending how we are reflected in the perspectives of other lesbians. It means becoming aware of what parts of our selves we want to change, what parts go on hold for now, what parts center us, and what parts we want to develop at any given point. It means periodically assessing our selves in terms of our values and in relation to others and their values.

Concern with integrity also means acknowledging and addressing our contexts. It means acknowledging the dominant society and which of its values we reject. It means exploring our racial, ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds, and considering which values from these contexts enrich and enhance lesbian meaning.⁹⁴ And it means acknowledging our lesbian context—developing ■ steadfastness and persistence as lesbians.

Concern with integrity, thirdly, means having an awareness of our selves as agents acting in situations and hence an awareness of what is our part in any given situation; it means having a sense of our selves as one among many. In general, integrity means being aware of and assessing

our selves among others in our many aspects. And agency, as I argued in chapter five, involves being able to go on in situations and act.

I believe an ethics which focuses on developing lesbian integrity and agency promotes lesbian connection because it can enable us to develop lesbian ability and lesbian responsiveness outside the framework of both the competitive and the "cooperative" values of the rule of the fathers.

Lesbian ability

We can work toward interacting in such a way that we each acknowledge and value (judge, evaluate) each lesbian's abilities as the means by which she draws the energies of the universe together and fashions patterns within a context.

Someone might object to this, pointing out, for example, that some lesbians' abilities include verbal character assassination. Certainly, verbal character assassination is an ability a lesbian develops in consideration of the world she lives in. But while she may use it against lesbians, it also can be a significant survival skill. Further, we can ask what values are emerging in lesbian context that make the choice to use it plausible to her. Hers is an ability to perceive aspects of others, together with verbal facility; this combination can be a tremendous skill. My concern is with the development of our abilities outside the framework of the fathers.

Among lesbians we have been learning to let our varied abilities complement each other, for example the abilities of a street-wise hustler and the abilities of someone skilled in socially "polite" behavior. In a lesbian context, the abilities of lesbians from all backgrounds have been emerging. I want this process to be recognized and to continue, for it is here that our abilities can develop. For example, the trickster or clown can develop her abilities in a context which does not promote hierarchy and bureaucracy.

Now if we focus on ability, it is important that we realize we do not need to pursue the competitive values of the fathers such that our endeavors become a matter of proving that one lesbian is better than all others at something. We need not regard developing and recognizing ability itself as establishing a hierarchy (a "stack o' priests"⁹⁵), for ability does not simply involve those activities designated as deserving award by an external authority. Each lesbian's abilities are different, and what she offers is her own concatenation of energy.

The competitive values

After all, to claim that one is the best in the world isn't to state very much at all. For example, to state that at some point in time one person is the fastest runner in the world must leave cheetahs laughing. On the other hand, the ability of a runner, her beauty—whether she is a cheetah, an olympic athlete, or a snail—lies in her form and flow of movement. That one has created this pattern of energy, this flow and form, here and now . . . well, that's quite impressive.

Consider, for example, the lesbian theory available or the lesbian music or the work of healers or of collectives. Is one book or one song or one remedy or one joke or one project better than all the rest? Certainly, at any given moment we may be especially drawn to one song or album, for example, since it crystallizes something deep within us. But to try to rank lesbian contributions one on top of another is to lose the way each contributes to a ground of being which helps the rest of us create.

We can be curious about, appreciate, and even delight in what others offer without evaluating our own offerings against theirs. In developing our own ability, we can then realize that each writer or artist or healer or comic or community organizer offers something unique with her energy, something which is both limited and focused. We are one among many. Each has her own talents and needs and agendas which can develop in a lesbian context. Remembering this, we can realize that we also make a difference. And this ability is part of our moral agency.

*Lesbian
responsiveness*

As for the ability of responsiveness, I am suggesting that rather than focusing on how we have responsibility to others, we focus on how each is able to respond to others. 'Responsibility', like 'accountability', encourages a one-way process—she's responsible to me; I'm responsible to her. As María Lugones notes, responsibility encourages us to act to stay in charge.⁹⁶ It is one of the ways we manage to keep (some) control over each other. Responsiveness, on the other hand, is two-way and focuses, rather, on the interactive nature of our engagements. Thus, when someone close to us is not responsive to us, does not respond to us, rather than react in outrage, feeling hurt at some injury, we might work to discover why the connection is broken.

Responsiveness is the energy and perception that brings us together, that draws us, the energy referred to by the slogan "lesbians ignite."⁹⁷ That energy keeps us moving, keeps us taking risks, finding ways to attend, to connect. When we have lost that energy, we start talking about responsibility. After that we become de-moralized and work toward resigning ourselves to authorities.

Responsiveness is the ability to acknowledge each other, to listen to, argue with, criticize, play with, get angry at, joke with, befriend, celebrate—in short, to engage. And we don't always respond well. I don't mean that we simply aren't nice often but rather that, given the best of our abilities, we sometimes nevertheless botch it. However, if we regard responsiveness as an ability, then we can realize it does not come full-blown in lesbians. We can develop it by developing our abilities of attending, intelligibility, and playful world travel, learning from our mistakes and our successes.

Responsiveness also involves the ability to appreciate what we have ac-

complished. I think too often we take for granted what we have done. Do we count having created connections, having woven patterns of gynocentric⁹⁸ or womanist⁹⁹ friendships among our accomplishments? When we do engage with others, whether as friends, lovers, daughters and amazons, collective members, or part of the community, we have woven an intricate pattern of energy. And even if individual relationships end on painful terms, a connection remains. In weaving connections among ourselves, we are creating new patterns of energy, tapestries. As Deidre McCalla muses:

I've been thinking lately
how different life would be
if I had never met you
and you had not met me.¹⁰⁰

When responsiveness becomes the ability—not the obligation—to respond, intimacy becomes compatible with autokoenony.

Responsiveness involves our ability to take each other seriously and make judgments. And as we increase our responsiveness with each other, we contribute to the context in which our lesbian values gain sense, and so we develop the means to be really able to respond to the needs—emotional, economic, psychic, and creative—of those with whom we're intimate, and we are able to move from there to widen our web of response. As such, responsiveness is the ability to participate in the creation of lesbian community.

Yet in suggesting that responsiveness is the ability to participate in the creation of community, I want to caution against pursuing the "cooperative" values of the fathers which lead to community being regarded as an entity, an institution, even a state, which can or must be protected and preserved over and against the integrity and agency of individual lesbians. These "cooperative" values exist to coerce the association of antagonistic individuals, and lesbian connection is an altogether different fabric.

*The "cooperative"
values*

In the first place, there will always be lesbian communities, or at least subcultures, as long as there are lesbians. As Paula Gunn Allen writes:

so dykes
are like indians
because everybody is related
to everybody
in pain
in terror
in guilt
in blood

in shame
 in disappearance
 that never quite manages
 to be disappeared ¹⁰¹

Secondly, neither subculture nor community has ever protected lesbians. Lesbian community does not exist to protect us either from an outside threat or from ourselves. Nor do we need to focus on community as an entity or an institution whose boundaries must be protected; for then it becomes defined by virtue of the outside force, and our interactions are directed toward its preservation rather than toward creation.

As I suggested in the introduction, lesbian community is a context. It makes possible and is created by lesbians engaging and networking. It has been a context in which to grow, a context in which to assuage wounds and heal, to create and develop possibility, to focus anger, to let loose imagination, to develop analyses, to engage in playful world travel, to issue challenges, to learn, to laugh, to enact ideals.

In this respect the community is a whole; for without it no individual lesbian could make any of the changes that are taking place here, at least not with any degree of depth. However, it is a whole, not as an entity, but, as I have suggested, as a ground of our lesbian be-ing. If there is an entity, it is not a state, an institution; it is our energy and the contextual reality that emerges from it. And as long as we value our own and each other's integrity and moral agency, as long as we encourage the ability to create, to grow, to learn, and to respond to each other—rather than shutting ourselves off by means ranging from rules of obligation all the way to ethnic and national boundaries—there will exist a context for lesbian be-ing.^u It can be created over and over in different forms by different lesbians. As Lee Lanning and Nett Hart note:

Living in community requires that none of us be self-sacrificing because the needs of the community are precisely to have each one be herself, offer her uniqueness in a self-loving way. In a community in which each woman is fiercely herself, the community is valued for itself, as a place of strong self-loving wimmin, strong in their differences as well as their com-

u While purporting to deal with man's development, fascist doctrine has a radically different concept of the individual. Mussolini argues that "Man is man only by virtue of the spiritual process to which he contributes as a member of the family, the social group, the nation, and in function of history to which all nations bring their contribution. . . . Outside history man is a nonentity. . . . Anti-individualistic, the fascist conception of life stresses the importance of the State and accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the State, which stands for the conscience and that universal will of man as a historical entity."¹⁰²

mon commitments. The community does not become a place in which the individual is lost; the diversity of persons promotes creative interchange. Self-loving wimmin form community to expand the possibilities for self-loving wimmin.¹⁰³

Lesbian community will remain solid as long as lesbian responsiveness revolves around it. It disintegrates where lesbians cease responding to concerns and events as lesbians. *For it is not because the ground of lesbian being exists that we move on it. Rather, it is because we move on it, choose to move on it and find each other here, that it exists.*¹⁰⁴

The value which has emerged from this burst of lesbian being, concomitant with the feminist movement and the gay liberation movement, and based on the value in the lives of lesbians who went before us, lies in all we have created, particularly the reality of lesbian context, problematic though it also is. And focusing on lesbian integrity, moral agency, and lesbian existence is key, I believe, to that value continuing to evolve from our choices.

Lesbian transformation depends on us and our choices, not on some utopic social structure with strict rules we might set up. It may be that we don't succeed in continuing to create lesbian value. That is always a possibility. I simply don't want to hide from that reality by resting in the false security of an ethics of control which itself not only can't guarantee ethical behavior but actually works against it. What we have, what we have had and will continue to have, is choice.

Choice

I still hear the cry, "But what about lesbian batterers or racists or lesbians who try to hurt others? What about all the other mean and nasty things lesbians do to each other? What about all those who just won't change?" To this I answer, "What about them/us?" "But," comes the cry, "I'm involved," to which I answer, "Then you have a judgment to make, and a choice." Or the cry might be, "But my friend is involved," to which I reply, "Then she has some choices to make." Or the cry might come, "But she's asked me to help," to which I answer, "Then you have some choices to make."

In the long run, if we regard Lesbian Ethics as rules of right behavior and obligation, we are not seeking help in making choices—we are seeking to avoid choice. We imagine that if only everyone would behave (indeed, in some cases, disappear), we wouldn't have to think about problems and face a choice. We appeal to rules and obligation so we *don't* have to understand the complexities out of which problems arise. Moral revolution will not emerge from such ignoring and ignorance.

I want to suggest that lesbian value and revolution emerge from lesbian creation, not lesbian regulation. The energy of this creation involves not preservation and security, but risk and change. And an ethics appropriate

to creativity, I believe, focuses on enabling our integrity and agency.

When we are centrally lesbian, our actions spin around, and so hold in place, a foundation, not of antagonism, but of a form of cooperation. This is not a cooperation that we can directly choose or pursue or force. It is a cooperation which flowers through the choices we make, as we engage, acting one among many, autokoenonously. My suggestion is that this cooperation emerges as a foundation (axis) of our actions when we focus on our own and each other's integrity and agency. This foundation is not really nameable, in fact if we try to name it, and thus focus on it, we will distort it. But it is there, just as the antagonism of the fathers' values is present in patriarchal interactions.

I think the strength of lesbian community lies in many strong, autokoenonous, limited (i.e., unique) lesbians making choices and operating in a lesbian context—at times angry, at times tacky, at times comforting, at times pushy, often irreverent, always with something to offer which the rest of us can grow from. (And often with something the rest of us may wish to avoid.) The breaks we have made from patriarchal thinking come from lesbians daring to create something new. Such focus, away from control, on integrity and agency, and toward the courage to take risks and try changes, yields the energy of Lesbian Ethics.