

Responding with history and story

an interview with

Joan Nestle¹

Joan Nestle is one of the founders of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City and has been an instrumental figure in the documentation of lesbian history as well as a highly respected teacher and writer (see reading list below). In this interview, Joan elegantly articulates why she and others chose to respond to the pathologisation of lesbian lives with the creation of history and stories. This interview took place in Adelaide, South Australia. David Denborough was the interviewer.

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DCP: As I understand it, the Lesbian Herstory Archives were created as a response to the pathologising and criminalisation of lesbian lives, and the violence and exclusion that lesbians experienced in the 1950s and 1960s prior to the gay and lesbian liberation movement. You chose to respond to this pathologisation with the creation of histories and stories. You chose to respond with the written word. I want to ask you why this was your response. Why have you dedicated much of your life to creating history?

Joan: My roots lie in the history of a people who were called freaks. For years our only social existence was on the pages of medical, psychological, legal and religious texts – all of which were dedicated to proving our pathology. It is not that our people did not speak, but their words and lives lived only in the context of the coloniser. As a queer person, this struck me deeply. It wasn't that we were missing from history, it was that we only existed in the terms and structures that others had built for us. It was time to build our own structures, our own history.

We responded with story and with history because to some degree that is all we are. The constructions, the stories that we make of our lives and our memories are perhaps the lasting markers of our species. One of the most profound ways of recognising human absence is by looking for and noticing where stories are silenced. Wherever there is a lack of existence of stories told in a people's own voice, then there is work to do.

I have been lucky enough in my own life to have participated in the beginning moments of a people's movement from private history to public discourse. Our first act was really an audacious one – to think that we didn't need anyone's permission; we didn't need to be archivists or even librarians, we just needed to be a group of women who knew that there had been courage and desire and strength that had not found a voice. And then we had to collect it, to create a history, and to give it a home. As we did so, we were creating a home for ourselves.

We needed to know that we, as lesbians, were not accidental, that our culture had grown and changed with the currents of time, that we, like others, have a social history comprised of individual lives, community struggles, and customs of language, dress, and behaviour. In short, we needed to know that we had the story of a people to tell. The discovery, or creation of this collective story was both wondrous and passionate. To create history is to develop a memory not just of our own lives but of the lives of others, people we have never met but whose voices and actions connect us to our collective selves.

We were doing this for ourselves and for future generations of lesbians. But I also felt that human history more generally would be a much poorer place without the tales of those of us who lived as freaks. To document our history, I believed and still believe, benefits us all.

It's relevant here to mention that I had moved through many liberations before the Lesbian Herstory Archives came into being. In particular, I have written about the significance for me of being on the Civil Rights march from Selma to Montgomery. I have carried the memories of the Civil Rights days with me, not to prove my credentials, for I know more than anyone how little I really did, but because those times taught me about the significance of history and how it is marked on a people's face and on their soul. I felt humbled before a larger history and I felt a profound privilege to be standing together at that time, on those streets.

I also felt shame. When I was doing voter registration work as part of the Civil Rights movement, I didn't tell people that I was a lesbian. I couldn't live all the different histories I carried with me because I felt one would shame another. Any gay or lesbian person who lived through the 1950s, who lived through the years before there was any language for Gay Pride, carries with them a legacy of shame. I continue to live with this legacy of shame even now at 62. There are many sources of shame, to be forgotten by history and then to forget yourself is one of the cruelest.

But shame can also be a source of powerful determination. The Lesbian Herstory Archives were, in many ways, born of shame. They represent acts of reclamation that became our life's work. I became determined to be a rememberer and to play my part in enabling a private people to become a public community. The Archives were a cultural creation that placed our people's lives back at the centre of things. We knew that if we did not do this, nobody would.

We responded with history and with story, because up until then stories had only been told about us, not by us, and our history longed to be written.

DCP: Because many of our readers are involved in therapeutic work with individuals, families and communities, I would like to ask how you see history and story as linked to healing in people's lives ...

Joan: Cultural representation – in other words, story and history – has to be a part of personal as well as communal healing, particularly for despised or excluded or marginalised people. I learnt this through my involvement with the Archives.

One of the things that the Lesbian Herstory Archives undertook was to turn deprivation in many realms – historical deprivation, cultural deprivation, personal deprivation – into a sense of plentitude. When a woman walked into our house, my apartment (where the archives were originally held), she would see on every wall and in every crevice expressions of lesbian life. She would see lesbian life in a multitude of ways and faces and I could see how this shocked visitors, particularly older women who would routinely say 'I didn't realise we had done so much'.

For so many older women, the burden of shame had cut them off from their own memories. They had destroyed love letters so that parents couldn't find them.

They had thrown away old lesbian paperbacks so they wouldn't be caught. There was such an amputation that had gone on. The Archives were able to give people back to themselves. I saw time and again people sitting and holding older books, records of life, images of love, and I witnessed the healing that this involved. I saw how the archives created a sense of continuity and how this changed people's self image.

Let me give you some examples. We were very keen to collect erotic lesbian imagery and to make this available to women who visited us. I remember clearly women who had had mastectomies and who were afraid to have sex, coming to the archives and just sitting and looking at erotic pictures. They would say to us that this was a way to gentle themselves back into having a sexuality. I also remember young people who would visit us who didn't know whether they were gay or not. Often these young people were in panic and anguish and someone had sent them to the archives. One of us would simply sit down with them and say 'Hey, just walk around and have a look'. And so these young people would have a chance to wander around in an unthreatening way and view cultural images to see if these could offer a home to them. Having a sense of history has to be healing.

But I don't want to make this sound romantic. History and representations of history are complex. We were not interested in depicting only one type of lesbian life. Because of my own experience with the criminalising 1950s, I felt it was essential that the Archives not become a hand-picked collection of respectable lesbian role models. Life is complex and contradictory and it isn't always sweet. In my 25 year history with the Lesbian Herstory Archives, I set myself the goal of commemorating the differences among lives in the hope of finding shared grounds of tenacity, tenderness and resistance.

History has many uses. It can be used to resurrect ancient bigotry or it can be used to document and invoke stories of resistance. One of the lessons I have learned is that for every repression, we have found a suitable form of resistance. Throughout my intimate life with the archives, with its filing cabinets and bookshelves, its endless stream of visitors, I was always looking for icons of resistance. I found them in out-of-print books, the oral history tapes, old copies of magazines, snapshots and snatches of conversation between visitors. Our history is the chronicle of our vitality, our passion, our cunning.

To make these collective histories of resistance more available to people is, I believe, to contribute to the possibilities for personal and communal healing.

DCP: Can I ask you to say more about why you have chosen to document histories of resistance ...

Joan: Resistance has to do with feeling marginal. I use this word carefully because the margins can be a very rich place to be. I'm not one who thinks of the margin as a place to flee from. I don't really know if one can, and I don't know if it is something to which I would aspire. My father died before I was born and this led me to the first kind of marginality I experienced. I was the only child in my school in the Bronx without a father and then there was my mother, who was all the things that mothers weren't supposed to be. My mother was a whore and a gambler, and so I had two choices. I either could condemn the only parent I had to judgement, or I could try to find the humanity that was her. This happened as a very young child. I remember watching and witnessing her life, sometimes mourning for the mother I didn't have, but somehow also knowing that I was learning something important.

I grew up knowing that those who don't have power, those who don't have respectability, have to find ways to live. They can choose to live where dispossession might lead them, or they can choose to take it as a point of honour and fight. My mother was a worker and a sexual outlaw. She might not have taught me how to dress like a woman or to brush my teeth right, but she worked in the garment industry and taught me the history of trade unions. She told me about Paul Robeson and other African American figures of pride and courage. Importantly, she made our personal drama a larger one. We suffered many evictions and she told me that we were living the life of class distinctions. It was significant for me to know that we were living on the side of the resisters. That was my early sense of history. I didn't have to go to school to learn history, I just had to learn who my comrades were and what happened to them.

My mother and I lived resistance, and so it was my personal understanding of life. It was also an aesthetic. Stories of resistance are the stories that make life larger than life. From the youngest of ages I have believed that all people in the world have a right to beauty. They have a right to the stories that make life glow. We have

responsibilities to gather, to collect and to tell tales of resistance. When they remain untold, those who are living on the margins are deprived of their greatest achievements and the loss to the collective human imagination is immense. When these stories are told and witnessed so much becomes possible.

DCP: In your work you have clearly linked eroticism and sexuality with documentation of history and resistance. I recall that you have written that 'erotic writing is as much documentary as any biographical display'. Can you speak about this, how are stories of pleasure sometimes descriptions of resistance?

Joan: I write what some call lesbian erotica and others call pornography. I write it to celebrate the fineness and richness of sexuality, the complexity of women's desire, because it is at the centre of our history as it is at the centre of our oppression as gay people.

I began writing in 1976-77 when I was seriously ill and was struggling to understand what was happening to my body. A group of friends formed a writing group around me to keep me company. I had been working since I was thirteen and it was absolutely essential that I earned money in order to pay my rent. I was at a loss and when it came to write something for this group, I decided to write an erotic memory. The act of this writing involved reclaiming a body that I didn't understand at the time. What I remembered were incredibly powerful erotic encounters. Not only were they erotic but they were markers of history because they had happened in the past, in a particular historical context that shaped our desires and how we could act upon them. It seemed to me, as I was struggling with my health, that my body needed its own history.

Rarely do we know how to bring together all the ways that humans make history. We make history with our minds, our hearts, our votes, and with our touch. We make history with our hands and our desires and I see my erotic writing as documenting this. Any archive worth making needs to include the history of touch, desire and want, for these are realms of life that mean so much to people.

DCP: One of the areas we regularly publish on involves ways of responding to the effects of sexual violence in the lives of adults and children. In my experience there is limited communication between the realm of people who respond

to issues of sexual abuse and the realm of people who talk, write and work about sexual pleasure. I would like to hear your views on this. When I read your writing about sexuality in all its expressions – as glory, as shame, as happiness and as solace – it seems to me that there is much about this writing that would be of relevance to people who have experienced sexual violence and also those who work in this area. I know that much of your writing, and the writing of the Archives, focuses on the sexual life of lesbians prior to the lesbian and gay liberation movement, when violence and abuse was a constant part of life for queer people. Could you speak about whether you think the sort of erotic writing you are engaged with could play a part in assisting people coming to terms with sexual violence?

Joan: That's an excellent question and, like anything else, there is a long history associated with this topic for me.

I am someone who had my own experiences of sexual violation from my mother's lovers. I have been in a battering relationship with another woman. I am someone who has experienced sexual abuse, and personally I find sexual exploration incredibly liberating within a structure that I set up to make it so. Just because someone is a sexual victim doesn't mean, or doesn't have to mean, that sexual desire and sexual expression is ruled out. In some circumstances, erotic writing, imagery and sexual play can be a way back to a fulfilling sexual life.

These are complex matters about which there are varied opinions. The American feminist movement has been very good at raising awareness and responding to the physical and sexual abuse of women. Alongside this work, I believe that it is necessary that there be as much attention paid to anatomies of pleasure as there is to anatomies of pain and abuse. Otherwise women are left in a state where they are protected, or in a state where they need protection. To focus only on an anatomy of victimisation is not enough. It creates too arid a place to live within – at least for me.

When a woman, or anyone who has been abused, feels that they are strong enough to turn again to transform a place of pain to a place of pleasure, I believe that it is important that they have access to a body of erotic imagery and erotic writings. I can simply say that finding ways to articulate the richness and complexity of women's desire, loving and longing has been therapeutic for me.

My mother taught me that every woman should have the right to sexual pleasure and this includes those who have experienced abuse. We know the dangers associated with sex and violence for women. We still don't know so much about women's pleasure. Until the power of sexual joy has replaced the power of sexual fear, this struggle will go on. We make different contributions to this struggle, my contribution is through my writing.

DCP: Finally, can we turn to your latest book, 'GENDERqUEER: Voices from beyond the sexual binary'. Can you say why you have edited this collection of writings?

Joan: My latest book, edited with Clare Howell and Riki Wilchins, is an anthology of transgendered and multigendered voices. It is almost like the Archives when they began thirty years ago as this book involves creating a home for the primary voices of an excluded people. I believe we are again at a significant moment in history. The transgender community is ensuring that the worlds of gender discussion will never be the same, not for feminists, not for anyone. In living their lives, transgender people are creating new gender histories: histories that will include the lives of men who spent many years living as lesbian feminists; women who started their biological lives as men and now live as lesbians; histories that will include the voices of people who live as both sexes when the medical world will allow them; and histories of mourning for the gendered selves not allowed to survive.

Transgendered people are opening up every question about gender. They are one of the most unsettling forces in the world today, and that's why so many are beaten and murdered in almost every culture. In times of militarism, nationalism and fundamentalism, one territory that those who need rigidity think they have a clear hold on is gender. They think they can clearly identify who is male and who is female. To think that this realm is opening up now beneath their feet is an amazing thing.

The challenges of the transgender world today are like the Stonewall liberation community thirty years ago. While that movement heralded enormous changes, there were also failings. The transgender community at Stonewall bore the brunt of the early liberation struggle, and yet as the struggle progressed they were left out in the cold. I will speak now as a lesbian feminist. When feminism took the position that there exists 'real' women

and that only such 'real women' were allowed into our movement, this was a failure. While we understood gender oppression, we didn't understand gender difference well enough. I hope now that all of us can go forward in a better comradeship in terms of gender and sexuality. I hope that nobody is left out this time.

When I witness the lives lived by transgendered people, who I am seeing more of in our community, I think about the past and the future. Transgendered people are now creating their histories just as we created the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I hope the creation of their history brings with it what the archives have brought to my life.

Living in the pre-liberation gay ghetto endangered my life, but remembering it gives me life. I now live far from the Archives, but if I close my eyes I can imagine that the house is silent and I am walking through the collection. I look into closets to see if old friends are still there. I push a book back into place, or stare into the face of a friend who now lives beyond death in this home of memory. I know that sometime I, too, will be returned to where I came from, to a place of cherished difference. I too will take my place in history. Whenever I closed the door of the Archives behind me, I would often just stand on the stoop, marvelling at the solidity of the home we have created. And solid it had better be for there are bound to be new challenges ahead.

Note

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Recommended further reading

- Joan Nestle's webpage: www.joannestle.com
- The webpage for the Lesbian Herstory Archives is: www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org
- Nestle, J. 1987: *A Restricted Country: Documents of desire and resistance*. New York: Firebrand Books. (Reprinted, London, Pandora Press, 1996. Soon to be reprinted by Cleis Press, 2003.)
- Nestle, J. 1992: *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch reader*. Boston: Alyson.
- Nestle, J. & Preston, J. (eds) 1994: *Sister and Brother: Lesbians and Gay Men write about their lives together*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Nestle, J. 1998: *A Fragile Union: New and selected writings (1987-1998)*. San Francisco: Cleis Press.
- Nestle, J., Howell, C. & Wilchings, R., (eds) 2002: *GENDERqUEER: Voices from beyond the sexual binary*. Los Angeles: Alyson Publications.