

Archives
D
3840
345
382

RUBY BAYOU

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA LIBRARY

MAR 07 1997

АВГУСТ 1996



Welcome to *Ruby Bayou*

What is this publication about? This is for our readers to determine. We can tell you what we're not: we are not an exclusive vehicle of Womyn's Action Coalition, the organization which provides the funding and support for *Ruby Bayou*. We don't concentrate solely on feminist issues, although we think they are important. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the organization.

We solicit provocative and intelligent thinking, whether the medium be articles, poetry, essays or black and white artwork, including photography.

This is a forum in which students and faculty can express their concerns and creativity. Like so many things, *Ruby Bayou* is going to be whatever we make of it, and the staff hopes to see a further evolution throughout future issues. We look forward to receiving your submissions, comments and suggestions, which may be directed to College Union Room 309 or vaxed to WACSG.

Purple Lover's Scene

Today I cut off the fingernails I scratched you with.

I boiled my sheets and pillowcases to remove your scent.

My shower lasted an hour as I tried to wash the rub of your hands from my body.

All the things I talked about with you I locked up in the closet

but I opened it again five minutes later.

I want to see you again.

When I woke up crying this morning, I knew.

I made a cat's cradle with those red hairs I plucked off of your shirt. Remember I told you I would clone you with them, so I could keep you here with me?

We would have had sex if you had stayed just two days more.

I ate some ice cream and thought about how I should have taken you to the Magic Fountain. I kicked myself in the ankle for making you a habit in only three weeks.

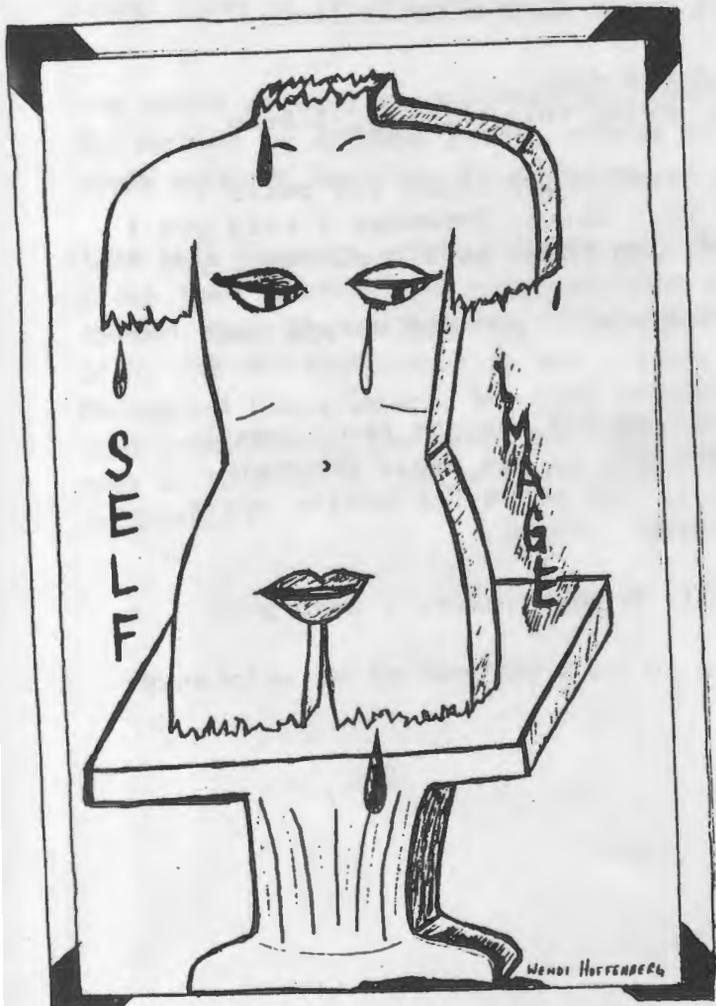
I spoke to myself in your voice. I used your phrases.

It is impossible to suck you out of my existence.

-S.B.

These jeans cost me \$50
but I'm sexy now
I can't breathe
but I'm sexy now
These shoes hurt my feet
but I'm sexy now
I'm holding back the tears
the makeup masks my pain
I feel like throwing up
am I sexy now?

-M.V.



Feminism and Hegemony

I have been calling myself a feminist for many years. By my sophomore year in high school, I was writing articles for the school newspaper on sexual harassment and the media/body image problem. By this, my sophomore year in college, I have become quite active in the campus feminist organization. Through these years of grappling with feminist issues, I have come to understand the nuances of women's complex problems in society fairly well. Recently, my college courses have begun to bring me to a point of understanding in problems of racism, classism, capitalism, and other aspects of social criticism which I had not thoroughly gleaned from my feminist self-education. However, I have begun to understand that reconciling these other social problems with a feminist vocabulary and point of view takes some effort on my part. Mainstream feminism does not consistently or adequately provide a social criticism which sufficiently confronts the plethora of social problems women must fight in order to create the just society envisioned by feminism.

When feminists ignore the problems in society which work along with sexism to contribute to an unjust and stratified society, their advocacy of more power for women comes out as supportive of the capitalist economic and political systems. While radical feminism would seek to deconstruct the institutions which benefit from not only sexism, but racism, classism, elitism, and homophobia, in order to transform society, liberal, or mainstream, feminism often advocates methods of grabbing more power for women within the unjust existing structures. This strategy often results in a social critique which is very hegemonic, or supportive of the contemporary elite powers that be. In the September/October 1996 *Ms.* magazine, famed feminist Gloria Steinem advances a construction of choosing not to vote as politically and morally malevolent. Although her argument reads as more than a little subversive, a closer look will find that it is just as hegemonic in our changing society as any old New York Times corporate propaganda.

Steinem defines staying away from the polls as deviant through various methods. The first is a negative guilt tactic. After a description of the Republican Congress which was elected in 1994, and an argument that they were Clinton's obstacle to accomplishing his liberal goals, she devotes an italicized paragraph to the following sentence: "*All of this could have been avoided if-only a few hundred additional voters per precinct had turned out*" (56). By

singling out those who abstained from voting as the cause of the Newt Gingrich effect on Congress, she is labelling their behavior as harmful. Steinem also writes in such a way that denies the feelings of frustration many American voters have been feeling. She stresses that there are many reasons to believe that Clinton is the obvious choice for president, even though many voters and readers sense that corrupting forces on the United States government contribute to the ineffectiveness of any candidate. By denying the sources of government corruption, she is denying the validity of the frustration which causes many Americans to abstain from voting.

Even further than denying the existence of sources of voter frustration, Steinem constructs a theory that these feelings are myths created by mainstream media in a plot to keep women from the polls. Her argument preys on feminist attraction to classic subversive language, as is apparent from the headline alone: "Voting as Rebellion: There's a *conspiracy* to turn women voters off. The question is: will we turn ourselves on?" (55) [*italics mine*] The ideas of rebellion and conspiracy complement the seemingly subversive argument. The main thrust of the article is that the reason women don't vote is due to a Republican/Right-wing effort to keep potential Democratic-voters (i.e. women) away from the polls. She argues that mainstream media's presentation of politics as a dirty game is simply an effort to turn off women from voting. Equating this with the denial of suffrage, poll taxes, and literacy tests, she declares, "It's interesting that the psychological turnoff- the idea that politics is a dirty game, and voting doesn't matter- began to be pushed just as the 1960's civil rights movement was showing the nation that voting could be meaningful" (56). Add some Twilight Zone theme music, and suddenly Steinem has created sinister forces working against women, which can only be forced out of Gotham City one way- by voting! Cynicism about politics, frustration that your vote will not make a difference, staying away from the polls: these are all just aspects of the Republicans' evil plot, and according to Steinem, they are deviant behaviors which women must overcome in order to affect society.

On the surface, Steinem's proclamations appear subversive. Surely, she is not supporting mainstream media or politicians in her disclosure of conspiracies brewing in our midst. However, Steinem's construction of political apathy is not unique to the feminist ranks of Ms. Regardless of the extremist, radical language she utilizes to

mobilize feminist women, her message bears a striking similarity to the one advanced by Ladies Home Journal in its effort to get housewives and other, more mainstream, women out to vote. LHJ, in their special Vote '96 supplement, gives women tips on how to overcome dirty politics and pay attention to the real issues through such features as "How to Protect Yourself From Toxic Politics" and "How to Watch a Presidential Debate." While Ms. has contended that its ad-free publication gives it more political freedom¹, the advertisements in LHJ's voting supplement can give us a hint as to how the effort in both magazines to get women out to vote remains extremely hegemonic. One such ad proclaims, "Election '96 is heating up, and in partnership with LHJ and LWV, Chrysler and Plymouth are right in the middle of the action with a dynamic program to Power the Vote! (106)" This is not just a public service announcement or campaign on the part of these not-so-philanthropic corporations. The efforts of Ms. and LHJ can be seen as hegemonic precisely because they advance such interests.

In defining a failure to vote as deviant, Steinem has made an extremely hegemonic assumption: that a female voting bloc will affect society. While she argues that Clinton is better than Dole, she ignores a crucial problem in the contemporary political system: the role of corporate dollars in governmental decision making processes². Steinem's article advances the interests of corporate campaign contributors and lobbyists by assuming that the political system is functional, as long as voters turn out to participate in the democratic processes. If we look at this brand of argument as representative of contemporary social movement rhetoric, we can see that movements such as feminism are not as radical as they may claim to be. Getting more women out to the polls to re-elect Bill Clinton does not challenge hegemonic interests, despite the seeming disclosure of a conspiracy. Progressives have yet to expose to their constituents the problem of corporate interests in the political system that they ought to be fighting against. To encourage women to buy into a system which rightfully frustrates them is akin to advancing the interests of the elite corporate, capitalist class who makes the American democratic system increasingly dysfunctional.

Steinem advances these hegemonic ideas through a focus on foreground issues. By defining the conflicts in the American political

system as issues of voters and candidates, she ignores the macro-level problems of the relationships between government power and corporate interests. Steinem discusses issues of Bill vs. Bob: "Since Clinton has opposed or vetoed all of the above (anti-abortion legislation which Dole supported), it's hard to imagine a bigger difference between the two candidates. And that's just one of many crucial differences" (61). On the opposite page, a chart shows these differences between the opinions of Clinton and Dole on such issues as affirmative action, military budget, and Medicaid cuts. Welfare programs, which Clinton recently slashed, are not discussed in any more detail than nursing home standards of its Medicaid component. In addition, Clinton recently signed a bill which budgeted more money for the military than Ms. writes that even Dole proposed, let alone \$11.2 billion more than Clinton had requested (Green, Purdum). While there are undoubtedly differences in the opinions of Clinton and Dole, these points show that Steinem has construed the differences to be wider than they really are. In addition, the fact that Clinton has not carried out actions in accordance with his proclaimed stances shows that there are larger forces at play in the political arena than the central presidential figure. Despite these issues, Steinem focuses two full pages to convincing readers that "Clinton is 'different' from Dole whenever he has the voters' support to be" and thus is the candidate we must go out and vote for (61). By ignoring macro forces of corporate influences and meso issues of the workings of our political system, Steinem is turning our attention toward micro issues of individual candidates in a hegemonic fashion.

The implications of labeling people who don't vote as deviant and harmful to the democratic process ignores a reality which they feel, but perhaps do not possess a full awareness of. When political (somewhat-)progressives (as would be most Ms. readers) are told by Gloria Steinem, the popular culture icon of feminism, that they are hindering the interests of their movement by not voting for Bill Clinton, they will feel even more frustration when Clinton lets them down a second time. On the other hand, if Steinem would fully expose the depth of the corporate influence in the political process, she might give some direction to voter frustration. By playing up Clinton as the good guy, and putting down Dole, she does not recognize the macro level problems. She writes, "We should know which Democrats take contributions from the tobacco industry (Clinton does

not), but we should also know that the Democratic party gets only about 15 percent of such money, while the Republican party gets 85% (Dole is rolling in it)" (58). In this single reference to corporate campaign contributors, Steinem neglects the overall effect of this practice, and the reality that Republicans and Democrats are, as Nader campaign information puts it, "essentially one corporate party with two heads" (Mazza).

Feminist readers of *Ms.* are among masses of Americans who are feeling increasing cynicism in regard to corrupting forces at work in the political process. By denying the macro-level influences, Steinem is supporting the interests of the corporations which cause the contemporary problem with no name. When social movement leaders refuse to acknowledge or define the problem for their constituents, there can be no outlet for their frustrations. Instead, Steinem ostracizes these people by labeling their actions as deviant instead of validating their frustration. In this way, Steinem has created a hegemonic definition of deviance which will divert the attentions of politicized feminists toward the ever-frustrating Bill vs. Bob debate and away from the macro-level causes of political corruption, which we could be fighting in order to create a more just society, not only for women, but for everyone.

Works Cited

Green, Pamela. "The Truth Squad." *Ms.* Sept./Oct. 1996: 60.

Ladies' Home Journal. October 1996. (special section on Election 1996: pps. 100-110)

Mazza, Patrick. "Ralph Nader and the real presidential race: Corporate Oligarchy vs. Democracy." (Nader campaign information packet)

Purdum, Todd M. "Clinton signs bill for \$256.6 billion for armed forces." *New York Times*, 24 Sept.: A1.

Steinem, Gloria. "Voting as Rebellion." *Ms.* Sept./ Oct. 1996: pps. 55-61.

Notes

1See Gloria Steinem's essay "Sex, Lies, and Advertising" in her recent book, *Moving Beyond Words* for a discussion of the stipulations on content made by advertisers.

2For a discussion of the issues of corporate/financial influences on government see the Frontline video "So You Want to Buy a President?" or the series of articles in the April 1996 *Mother Jones*, including Ted Cup's "The Mother Jones 400".

Clothesline

I see my name hanging
On a colored piece of cloth
It sways so easily in the breeze
As I once did.

I close my eyes before this collage of women
And remember the rope around my neck
the fist across my face
the knife at my neck
Power versus powerless
The punishments I did not deserve.

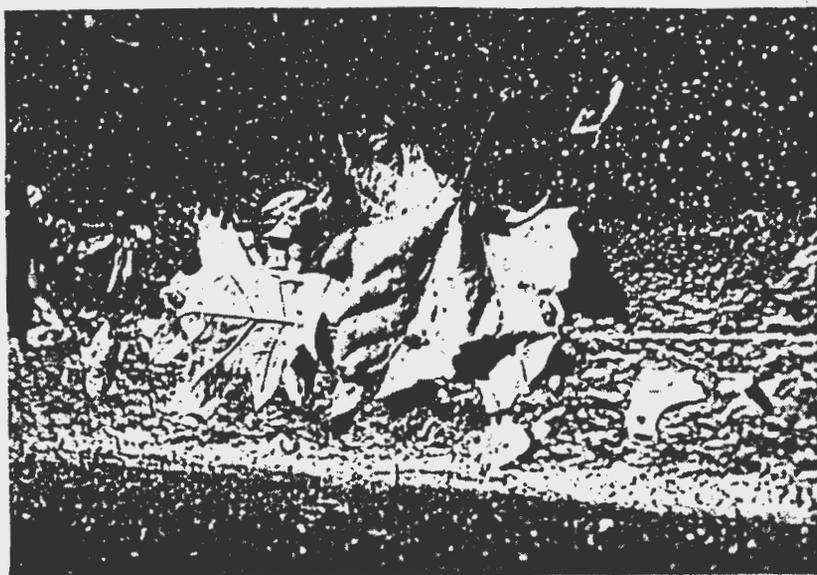
Embraced by the passion of anger
Unable to act
Frozen from fear
Repurcussions
Of disagreeing, saying no, being a woman.

That was forever ago
And underneath the fear
I am a beautiful colored cloth
Swaying so easily in the breeze
Dancing in the passion of life and womanhood.

Not alone
With others I sway
With many colors, many cloths
Many strong women.

I think I shall seek
In an orphan's wake
The signs of sky light
Through stormy rain
Pellets of mercury
Sweating my brow
Ants forming patterns
in the palm of my hand
on my kneecaps
Roly-poly's rolling on my thighs
Amber waves of tree bark
between my toes
Water in my ears
my eyes
One with the earth
at
LAST.

-M.P.



Kumari Devi

"Kumari Devi" is the Nepalese for "Living Goddess." There is indeed such a person; a little girl, a goddess only as long as her childhood remains. The Kumari Devi is selected from the Buddhist goldsmith's caste at the age of three. She must be of outstanding beauty with no blemish upon her body. After proving her divinity after a series of ordeals, including an overnight stint in a room filled with skeletons, she and her family are welcomed into their new home in a temple in the center of Kathmandu. There the Kumari Devi remains, spending her waking hours in prayer and attendance to the Hindu deities. Important men visit her; they approach her throne tremulously, seeking advice. She is allowed outside the temple only once a year. Her life continues in this way until she reaches puberty. This landmark event, menarche, is the point at which the Kumari Devi's divinity expires and at which my speculations begin.

I imagine the Kumari Devi waking early from a peaceful sleep on a morning like any other; stretching, rising to wash. She goes to the toilet, as even the most divine of mortals are obliged to do. It is here, sitting on the pot, that she finds nearly a decade of exaltation to have ended with a drop of blood.

Blood, says the Kumari Devi to herself, touching the stain on her nightclothes with one curious finger. She knows what it means: she is no longer divine.

The monks-or someone- will have to pick a new goddess, thinks the Kumari Devi: a little girl with smooth skin and round eyes who will move into my chambers and assume a transient divinity. She will sit and pray and the heads of state will kneel before her throne and lay their heads in her lap. The thought of a man's head in her own lap suddenly strikes the Kumari Devi as horribly improper: she blushes.

She doesn't want some stranger-baby encroaching on her temple. Maybe I can stay here, the Kumari Devi thinks. No one has to know what has happened. -But no. She is not a goddess now; she is unclean, bleeding, something would give her away. She has

an uncanny image of menstrual blood seeping up through the floorboards from some unknown source to profane the base of her throne. The Kumari Devi finds this scenario funny.

Well, what is she to do now? She will move with her parents back to the village which she remembers as a series of shadows from infancy. She will learn a craft. She might, like the other girls, marry, but it is unlikely that any man will want her. There are old wives' tales about the husbands of erstwhile goddesses and how they all fall to early deaths. If this is so, she thinks, it is probably because of the strain these men incur in governing their wives. How could any man hope to maintain control over a woman who has once been divine?

The sun, peering at the window of her lavatory, jolts the Kumari Devi back to the immediacy of her situation. Everyone is going to awaken within the hour, she thinks, and they will find me here bleeding, and send me off to my village home as quickly as my family and I can pack our suitcases. I will not be allowed to sit on my throne again, not even for a day. It would not do to have a goddess in residence here who is not a goddess in truth.

It is better to abdicate, thinks the Kumari Devi, than to be deposed. She washes quickly and dresses, folding a thick rag to absorb the issuance which has ended her reign. She packs a bottle of water, some fruit and a loaf of bread in a small sack, and slips out the door before anyone else awakens.

The Kumari Devi has been outside the temple walls no more than ten times in as many years. She knows almost nothing of the good which exudes from the vibrant city around her, and even less of the evil. Still, she resolves to walk; to keep walking until she reaches her village home by the force of her spindly legs. She thinks: I have left the temple under my own power. I have allowed no one to tear my from my throne.

This woman, only yesterday a goddess, keeps a cheery tempo on the pavement with her sneakers. Afraid of nothing, she will walk until long past sundown.

Free Association

She says "who" and he says "what"
Questions and answers, back and forth
Who knows what they are thinking?
But they make each other think

She gives the answer as a question
He questions what her answer will be
(She thought it was already clear)
Pawns traded back and forth in a chess game

Soon yield to the knights and bishops
That give way to the rooks and queens
This looks like it will be a draw
Piece for piece, skill for skill, the same

Skills, like occupational skills?
They don't know where they're going,
Only what they want to be someday
"So what do you want to do tonight?" he says

Tonight the sky is a river falling down
A good night to be inside with someone
He smiles, surprised she's really there
She's startled she had the nerve to come

But he thinks that she belongs there
(Once she learns that the ceiling is low)
Late that night, or early the next morning,
She returns to the apartment he's never seen

They remember words, one after another
Free association -- say what you feel
But the only thing left to say was goodnight
As she held him in her arms

you were so close today
I felt your heart beating
And your breath on my cheek
Those lips
Oh those lips
Mocking me
All I could see was your
Beautiful face
You are totally
Unaware
Of my passionate
Feelings of love.

-S.S.

Peach knit sweater
with SNAKES
on my SKIN
wind me up
so I can lead you on
one more day
these snakes don't bite
-M.V.

Untitled by anonymous (a woman)

I am home on break.

Funny how things work in the minds of the sane: They carry me away from home-- this "asylum for insanity" --and send me back, on a timely basis, to revitalize my mind. When I get too close to that threshold of normalcy, they send me back to be rejuvenated--freshened up with insanity.

And it works.

I have spent three years dealing with people in a massive conglomerate of "theyness". The nurses, doctors, wardens....one big heap of "they". But, coming home, faces with names loom in front of me, all in mocking derision of familiarity. Insidious things... demanding that I recognize them. Recognize me in them, recognize them in me. I am no longer an untouchable, solitary entity. What happens to me happens to these faces with names.

I suppose it's that unconscious recognition that has kept me alive for nineteen years. Kept me away from myself.

I am home on break. Oh, where have I been? Locked up in anonymity. Patient number 65-780-985, come get your medication, Miss Liv...Livint...Livintson (I hide behind poor phonetics). And I respond, adoring the numerical value I have been reduced to, and swallow three tiny pills I imagine are reducing me even more. Until I have become the pills. My entire body collapsed into diminutive plastic encasements, with only the power to numb.... and be numbed.

It's at home that my senses are made keen. I can hear guilt lingering underneath my mother's words. I can see it crouching behind her eyes. I can feel it clinging to her flesh. Parasitic guilt. In my father's eyes, in his words, on his skin, I see, hear and feel a different kind of remorse. Almost saprophytic. This has killed him. And it keeps eating on his dead flesh.

What it is to see the biggest cannibal of my life gnawed on beyond death. Sometimes, looking at his gaunt face (cheeks sunken

in, paled lips, blank eyes-- all in the way of death), I am sure he just picked himself up out of his grave, and I am waiting for the earth-worms to slink in and out of his ears. Waiting for the ants to spill out of his mouth. Waiting...

For my big debut.

A debutante.

Far from it. My hips and thighs are too wide; "I don't know what your mother is thinking, letting you eat so much food like that, with a body like that". My skin is too oily, too plagued with acne; "There must be some sort of medication for those zits of yours". My hair is limp and dull; "Girl, why don't you get some style and shine to that hair of yours". And my eyes are even duller; "Damn, what's with that expression on your face? Your eyes look like they've been open for thousands of years and are sick of seeing".

And I am. Sick of seeing. Sick of watching the fear crawl over my mother's face if the god damn meat is too pink inside. Sick of seeing the anger spread over my father's reddened face when the god damn meat is too pink inside. "Married to me 20 years and you still don't know how to cook a decent hamburger". God, this is all so trivial.

God, this is the world.

If I could just learn to love the proper way. If I could just look beyond my father's domination, beyond my mother's subordination. I do want to love them wholly. I suppose this-- my inability to love properly-- has been the greatest tragedy of my life. But it is, and always has been, all or nothing for me. Love or hate. But, how much love have I known, really? Sixteen years old and I learned to group people into "they".

Nineteen years old and I'm still doing it.

These are the times when I can feel my eyes welling up. And I blink to hide it.

I need my senses back. I know that. But, I've been so paralyzed for so long, I don't know if I remember what it is to feel. Or if I want to remember.

These are the times when I can feel my eyes streaming with tears. And no amount of blinking can hide it.

My mother will find me here, my eyes swollen and red. I will be laying here trying to decide what hurts more: closing my eyes and reeling in the darkness or keeping them open in the stinging light. And she will cry, too, and beg me to "get better".

And if I didn't choke on my words so much, I would tell her that I *am* getting better. That every tear is a reconciliation. Every sob, an alleviation.

But I choke and say nothing. And she recognizes this as some sort of degenerative, regressive behavior. So I am eagerly sent back and I rescind into my anonymous world.

What it is to leave.



Contributers:

Sara Beinert
A.J. Chodan
Lisa Glinsky
Wendi Hoffenberg
Michele Kemnitzer
Julie Rivchin
Sarah A. Sharlow
Mary Vrinotis

Visual Interest:

Wendi Hoffenberg
Jane Kim

Production Staff:

A.J. Chodan
Wendi Hoffenberg
Jane Kim
Julie Rivchin
Mary Vrinotis
Monica Welty

Coordinating Editors:

Sarah Beinert
Julie Rivchin

Special Thanks to:

The Lamron Staff for the use of their computers
Womyn's Action Coalition

SUNY Geneseo College Libraries

3 0260 00604 1077

