

# On Belladonna\* Collaborative: An Attempt To Explain a Rigorous, Radical Feminist, Left/Anarchist, White-Founded, Racial-and-Economic-Justice- Focused, Queer, Non-Binary Literary Culture and Practice

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Note: This essay is an adaptation of one that I wrote in June 2018, specifically as presentation for the inaugural meeting of Belladonna\* Collaborative's new board of directors. For the first eight years of Belladonna\* Collaborative, 2010-2018 (which had been in its earlier iteration Belladonna\* Series, 1999-2009), collaborative members held nominal board positions but operated without fidelity to stated hierarchical positions. We described ourselves as an anarchist collective, which we were, and which the collaborative, when it does or doesn't meet and especially as I step away, continues to be. As far as I can tell there is no deciding person currently, and yet things get made, true to the original vision of/commitment to holding open the space in which each individual feminist in the collaborative engages their particular ability for recognizing nascent, emergent language that is being otherwise

silenced; making a work against the obliteration of feminist, anti-racist difference, found present in a person (Celina Su, LaTasha Diggs) or in a manuscript (*Landia, Swarm of Bees in High Court, Mauve Sea-Orchids*), or in an idea or question (exposition of Harryette Mullen, feminist elders, germinal texts, refeminism101, politics, radical intersectionality, material lives of writers). As Belladonna\* became larger and more fiscally and culturally entangled, the collaborative made the decision to build a more traditional board of directors. This essay began as my way of situating an entry point to the newly assembled directors. The expansion of this essay for *Matters of Feminist Practice* becomes more autobiographical towards tracking the lineage of some foundational ethics and utopian aspirations built into Belladonna\*'s radical feminist structures.

In my mid-30s when I started the Belladonna\* Reading Series at Bluestockings Feminist Bookstore, I was an emerging poet, but a radical feminist since my early 20s. The feminism that I am calling radical was one that was taught at SUNY Albany in 1983-1984, by a student run collective that designed a course called "Introduction to Feminism." It also ended up being my introduction to Lesbianism. In the current atmosphere of suspicion of radical feminism and feminists of the second wave, a wave that features a hefty dominance of middle-class white women who benefit and benefitted disproportionately from the activism and thinking of Black and Brown feminists and womanists, I want to say a few words about why and how I continue to claim my lineage as radical feminist. I want to say why I still think the designation of those two words continues to be useful and usable, and how those ideas are evidenced in the longevity and the ongoing intersectionality and anti-hierarchy of the Belladonna\* project.

For me, the first appeal of Radical Feminism came from the intersectional insistence by Black and Brown feminist and womanist activists like Barbara Smith, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, and Gloria Anzaldúa to name a few, that the first line of feminism was to be "against hierarchy"—of class, culture, race, gender, politics. I am purposely keeping this idea, that feminism can embody an across-the-line critique of hierarchy with patriarchy as a model hierarchy but never a sole or overriding hierarchy...

I'd say *oppressive hierarchies* but my early radical self understood passionately that hierarchy itself is the thing that was oppressive at its root... oppressive by definition.<sup>1</sup> Recent work by anti-racist and trans

activists articulates how cultural hierarchies are insidious and appear as ubiquitous micro-aggressions that are relentless, exhausting. For me the micro-aggression is connected to the notion of collective examination by associated activists in conversation about how the personal is political, that is, how proximate and intimate relationships (at work, home, school, amid friends, even those with whom we share rapport and some political beliefs, and when encountering deliverers of needed services and civic workers) reproduce on a micro level hierarchies embedded in the white capitalist patriarchy. That is to say, a totalizing and supremacist system of repression whose operations are reproduced by being in our head, bed, body, home.

I learned of separatism, be it Lesbian or Black or Latina/x, as a method of dealing with the exhaustion of liberatory analysis of white patriarchal oppression. Since then, I have always maintained myself as Lesbian separatist as much as I can, on purpose, though I am sleuth about it. I consider it to be what is now called self-care.

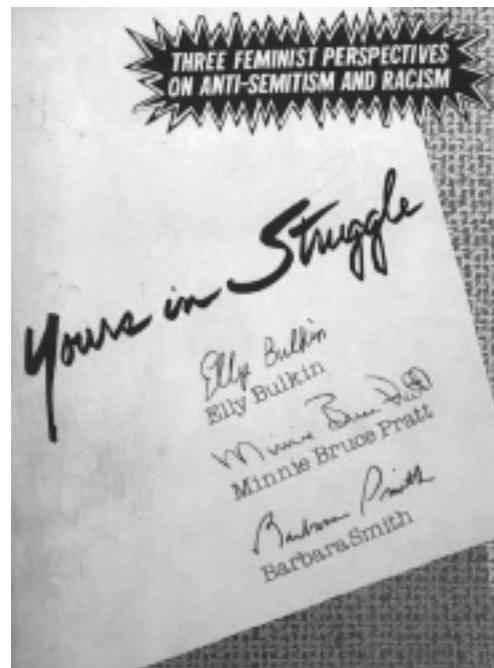
Radical Lesbian separatism now bears, carries, wears a stain of the trans ban at Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, and the legacies of prominent feminist scholars digging into the notion that anyone not cis female can't know what it means to experience patriarchy as a cis female. I consider this stain unfortunate, because it obscures too much else that happened and happens in second wave feminism... and has harmed a continuity of struggle, intergenerational support, and made many old school grassroots radical dykes *and the organizational feats they achieved*, moot. I name organizational feats for the purpose of this piece because I want to ever make more visible the hard to discern but potent

intimate-scale organizational relations that were so much of what happened in radical feminism. Especially the publishing projects such as Kitchen Table and Women's Press Collective, in the United States. I consider intimate-scale organizational relations to be a site where feminists can fluidly address power differentials and difference amongst allies.

I came out into a sea of radical second wave feminists who actively and energetically focused on intersectionality of race, class, gender, geography, and anti-capitalism. In fact I came out in Albany, NY in 1983, where Barbara Smith and Kitchen Table Press were situated and influential in local Radical Feminist activism. The elders who had jobs as full-time faculty or in government were committed to providing inter-generational material support. There is a hilarious scene in my head of a bunch of us shirtless and inexperienced getting paid to build one professor a deck on a slope behind her house. There was my tall and bare-breasted lover, stretching her arms to tenuously hold the thing up while we scrambled with hammers and nails. (I wonder if that deck is still standing. I doubt it.) I was given work as a housecleaner and wasn't fired though I know that I was bad at it, still am, disorganized and untrained, slow and spacing out while waxing a wooden banister. This kind of feminist ethics I encountered via Albany feminists appears in memory, at potluck dinners, protesting the 60-cents-to-a-dollar wage gap at college graduation, and in an ongoing confrontation via public arguments with racism: arguments against the demand to claim a singular identity of struggle and allegiance, and arguments with liberal politics in white feminism—about which there are several anthologies including *All the*

*Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* edited by Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith and published by the Feminist Press in 1982; *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa with a forward by Toni Cade Bambara, published in 1981 by Persephone Press; and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith and published by Kitchen Table Press in 1984.

The last one I'll mention is one whose cover I'd like to show here for how it signifies to my eventual point: *Yours In Struggle*, edited by Barbara Smith, a Black Lesbian feminist; Elly Bulkin, a Jewish Lesbian feminist; and Minnie Bruce Pratt, a Southern White Femme Lesbian feminist. The signature as the title of the book is significant. The painful struggle toward intersectionality, of addressing micro and macro-aggressions, was staged on the one-to-one, direct, ever so sensitive stage of public and private letter writing.



One of the most rightfully famous letters, and the one I most often refer to, is Audre Lorde's letter to Mary Daly in *Sister/Outsider*. The letter is a powerful critique of Mary Daly's violence toward Black women in *Gyn/Ecology*. Lorde painstakingly outlines how Daly's torquing of hers and other Black feminists' words to support singularly negative and powerless examples of African and Black women's mythology produces victimization by suggesting that Black women are only more victimized and not also buoyed by distinct matriarchal lineage and myth:

So I wondered, why doesn't Mary deal with Afrekete as an example? Why are her goddess images only white, western european, judea-christian? Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo, and Mawulisa? Where were the warrior goddesses of the Vodun, the Dahomeian Amazons and the warrior-women of Dan? Well, I thought, Mary has made a conscious decision to narrow her scope and to deal only with the ecology of western european women.<sup>2</sup>

The pain of the letter is palpable. In the letter, Lorde reveals that by writing it, she is breaking with her commitment to care for herself by no longer educating white women on their blindness and aggression, so one feels how this letter is particular, necessary, important, specifically about her inability to shield herself from Daly's work because it closely intersects with, and had historically informed, her own. At several points Lorde iterates her appreciation and use of Daly's theological research and thinking. Lorde ends her letter with, "This letter is in repayment." The line serves as a final acknowledgment of knowledge production that had transpired between

the two writers beforehand, served with a forceful assertion of political and intellectual and ethical authority. The letter performs a kind of dignity and recognition of all sides while it outlines the limit of the negotiation, of what might in today's lexicon be called labor. (At the time she sent the letter to be included in *Sister/Outsider*, Daly hadn't yet written back, but a letter from Daly was found in Lorde's papers and apparently they did meet once again.)

In 2014 I visited the Feminist archival collection at Duke, in the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture, to investigate it as a possible home for the Belladonna\* archive. Minnie Bruce Pratt's papers are there, as are Kathy Acker's. I spent time with both and with both I was struck by how much was addressed by letter writing, by a fearlessness about relation, by the confidence that relation among feminists was possible *even when we were hurting each other*. That we were what we had.

My radical Lesbian feminist elders were also promoters of the life necessity of poetry and poets. They were the people who turned me on to the poetry that made me a poet, though this happened ten years later. Judith Fetterley, whose book *The Resisting Reader* identifies how the masculinist canon emasculates readers ([sic] she says girl readers but I'm saying readers) literally *recognized* me struggling through my own alienation from myself as a writer, making gobbledygook out of my thinking when I was writing so that I was writing something incomprehensible. She said, "Take my expository writing class." It's where everything that was to happen in my somewhat far future begins. It's where I read Audre Lorde's *ζami*, Judy Grahn's "A Woman Is Talking to Death" and "The Psychoanalysis of Edward the Dyke," Toni

Morrison's *Sula*, and Kate Millett's *Sita*, among others which have stuck to me. We met and heard everyone writing radical work because our radical feminist teachers knew the radical feminist writers. I am awed that I met Audre Lorde in a small gathering to which Professor Fetterley invited her to come and talk to us; that day taught me all that I know about the power of love.

### SOME STRUCTURES OF AN EMERGENT BELLADONNA\*

In 1999, I returned to NYC from Naropa and from a long stay in San Francisco and joined the NYC downtown poetry and avant-garde scene. After all the years of queer, feminist, and anti-racist activism, the shocking cultural (patriarchal/gynophobic) dissonance of that moment drove me to create a platform for the “feminist avant-garde” that would feel better and more expansive to me, more idealistic and aiming to be non-hierarchical. Belladonna\* began as a reading series at Bluestockings Bookstore on Allen Street shortly after the store was opened by Kathryn Welsh as a woman's feminist bookstore.

Besides a flight from NYC poetry misogyny, I wanted the series to be a free zone for language experimentation; not for the sake of the experiment itself but for listening to emergent ways of expression that resist replicating patriarchal and white supremacist logics. I am riffing off of something I've read in Édouard Glissant's chapter on “Creolization” in his *Poetics of Relation*, his notion of listening for the sounds imperceptible under colonial supremacy that are always coming through the cracks in the ground. I am also drawing on Judith

Butler's notion of the living death in *Antigone's Claim*—the confrontation with the neat order of separation of kinship (female) and power (male) that Antigone insists upon and that cannot be silenced in the crypt. I read this book because Akilah Oliver was reading it at the time of her death... since her 20 year-old son died from a Los Angeles hospital's notorious racist neglect, she'd been working on a theory of lamentation in which the mourning ground would be recognized as making space, not just space to escape from. Troubling, strange murmurs are like souls trying to emerge... it's hard to hear them. It's hard because one doesn't know what to listen for. Emergent ways, systems, logics in language are often rejected as wrong, and unheard. Hence, Belladonna\* has never had submission calls. Conversation, too, is key to sounding out feminist and resistant logics. It's stumbling, sometimes guttural, filled with questionable and arguable assertions. Gail Scott, member of a Montreal group of feminist language theory and writing makers, whose existence influenced the making of Belladonna\*, writes in her seminal essay “The Sutured Subject,”<sup>3</sup>

“That for me writing is conversation is no doubt linked to early militant years, when many of us could not, would not, separate the struggle for changing the world from the struggle for finding the appropriate language to engage that world.”

Much of what we have come to publish and promote is in dialogic form.

In my introduction at the first Belladonna\* reading (with Akilah Oliver and Marcella Durand) I declared Belladonna\* for now a woman's series, not knowing exactly what I meant by it, or what we even think

we mean when we say “woman,” or what such a gesture sought in terms of feminist intervention. Perhaps leaning on identity politics theory and research from girls’ schools, I imagined the space would be more supportive of female flourishing and knowledge production beyond and outside patriarchal limits.<sup>4</sup>

Especially early on, each reading aimed to feature a poet who was more established supporting someone beginning or less known, and two to four open readers from the bookstore audience. David Kirshenbaum, long-term publisher of Boog Lit, was one of the first men who came to the readings. He offered to make the very cheap “chaplets,”<sup>5</sup> and we started doing that together in 2000. It was a lot of me schlepping and me paying (but not paying very much) Wholesale Copies, an old school print shop on the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> Ave and 28<sup>th</sup> St. From the start of the chaplet series, and this remains important, we asked writers for 5-15 pages of work that was either in progress or something they were thinking about or returning to at the moment. The emphasis is on immediacy—the ephemeral nature of the chapbook wedded to the event of the reading itself. We don’t usually reprint chaplets, they are meant to record a moment in time that will change. As such, the full sets, which are in ten or more library collections, are a trove of information about feminist writing process.

I think it was Maureen Owen and Elaine Equi who encouraged erica kaufman to join me as an intern late in 2000. erica is how things started to grow, and rapidly. erica has a great and different organizational acumen than I do. Somehow, within the first minutes (I’m exaggerating a little), erica got us resettled in a wonderful venue, Dixon Place: NYC’s radical lab theater

that was then still after 25 years in Ellie Covan’s living room. Dixon Place paid our curators and our readers, and erica got us a CLMP (Center for Literary Magazines and Presses) membership even though we didn’t meet the ISBN/ISSN, book list size, or distribution criteria.

In 2006, we collaborated with Litmus Press (who had proper ISBN and CLMP bona fides) to make two books. erica also moved us, at that point, into a funding loop. We filed for New York State not-for-profit status, then erica got us NYSCA funding, and CLMP gave us our first FACE OUT grant for Lila Zemborain’s *Mauve Sea Orchids* and Marcella Durand’s *Area* (we’ve received several of these grants since then). We started getting interns from the New School where erica had gotten her MFA and where we have had friends looking out for us, including Jennifer Firestone who we later published and who is now on our board, and from Leonard Schwartz at Evergreen College, from whence we connected with the poet and designer HR Hegnauer who has designed the majority of our books to date (Bill Mazza has designed 90% of the chaplets). We moved the project out of my house and into the current studio at the Monti building, then newly retrofitted to be a green artists’ studio building at 925 Bergen St., Studio 405, in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, NY—not far from my apartment. Every year we get a little pot of honey made by the bees on the roof.

As our tenth year in 2009 approached, it looked like the project would fold. erica was leaving and my adjunct academic job was getting bigger, moving toward full-time and with an administrative component. I could not hold the project, which was 100% volunteer labor. In one year,

from September 2008 to September 2009, erica and I organized The Elders Series, eight consecutive monthly readings, hosted by a guest curator who selected one or two “elders” and edited a collaborative book including work by the guest curator, the invited elders, and combinatory components of all two or three, in the form of a conversation, collaboration, or essay. #1 of the The Elders Series was edited by Tracy Grinnell who published work and read with Leslie Scalapino. #8 was edited by Cara Benson who invited Anne Waldman and Jayne Cortez. We also held the Advancing Feminist Poetics and Activism conference, or “ADFEMPO,” at the CUNY Grad Center in 2009, for which we also brought together a conference committee that included Emily Beall, Kate Eichhorn, Laura Elrick, Tonya Foster, Laura Jaramillo, Anna Moschovakis, Akilah Oliver, and Jennifer Scappettone. The experience of gathering this committee, which at the time we called a collective committee, had a strong impact on the events that follow.

The Elders Series and ADFEMPO were constructed to mark the project’s ethics, impacts, and critical frame so that it would be historically legible, in the case in which the project would end or if it would continue in a new form. I’d always fretted about not having written more about our feminist avant-garde poetics and the ideas, both formal, editorial and political, that occur throughout the chapbooks/chaplets, which at that time numbered over 100 (and now nearly triple that).

Alone, shutting the project down seemed necessary. But then, at the same time, several people approached me to ask about projects, or with interest to be involved: Martine Bellen, Barbara Henning, Akilah Oliver, Kristen Prevallet, Caroline

Crumpacker, Lila Zemborain, Emily Skillings, Krystal Languell, Marcella Durand. Anyone who asked to do stuff with this project, was invited over my house to see about how it could go on without me at the helm. I’d learned from putting together the committee for ADFEMPO that if a group of people is solicited by a central person, it’s never going to be collective/lateral; power and deference will follow, and controlling behaviors on the part of the person who organizes.

In 2010, Belladonna\* Collaborative was started—we picked “collaborative” over “collective” in our name to indicate greater autonomy—and it has been a growing yeasty thing ever since, with some central organizers, particularly Krystal Languell and Ana Paula and Saretta Morgan and Emily Skillings, and many contributors, including Marcella Durand, Barbara Henning, Jennifer Firestone, Chia-Lun Chang, and lots of energy by lots of people. Other folks have cycled through and curated, such as Montreal-based poet, novelist, critic, and editor of *Lemonhound*, Sina Queyras, who became closely involved while she lived in NYC in the mid-aughts, co-hosting several Canadian poets including Margaret Christakos, a rawlings, Rachel Zolf, and Kate Eichhorn. The poet and translator Sawako Nakayasu worked with us to make the Festival of Japanese Women while she was living in Japan, and Lila Zemborain brought us several writers from Argentina including the feminist collective *Belleza & Felicidad*.

The story of the past ten years is too much to tell, but for two points of interest to the now-establishment of a working managerial board of directors that is true to not-for-profit board protocol and hierarchy: A couple of years into the Belladonna\* Collaborative formation, in 2011, Krystal

Languell and I went to the Emergent Poetics Conference at University of California at Santa Cruz to present on this new and seemingly functional despite leaderless formation. Theresa Carmody, of the also feminist avant-garde press Les Figues, asked us how far in we were—expressing doubt that such a structure was sustainable. For ten years it was... for the bulk of those ten years we managed by gathering for a weekend a year for a county retreat (hosted by Caroline Crumpacker) where we cooked and figured out our pressing theme and structured the anarchic activity for the year. It couldn't last like that for a variety of reasons—quotidian facts of managing the storage and reprinting of books by the living and dead whose language continues to propel, challenge, and save; those living and dead to whom there is a felt commitment to keep books in print. And there is a lease and rent increases. We need workers, we need to collect and organize the archive. We need to record keep and book keep. Are ideas quotidian? I have always thought of this project as an idea more than an institution (something propertied). So, free: not owned or attributed to a person, be it me or another, so that it is accessible to s/he/they around the table who reaches into the idea in their whatever way.