

Requiem for a Movement

An essay by Lise Weil

A little more than eighteen years ago, the *Women's Review of Books* published my essay, "Losing Ground," in which I mourned the loss of physical gathering places for feminists and especially lesbians. I detailed the bookstores, bars, journals, art galleries and performance spaces that studded the city of Montreal when I first moved here in 1990, most of which vanished in the decade that followed. "By way of these spaces, the work of lesbian and feminist writers, artists, [and] thinkers entered the very texture of city life," I wrote. Montreal was my case in point, but my sense of bereavement extended to all of North America—to the coffeehouses, bookstores, festivals, and conferences that once had been and no longer were, and that together had made up a rich, vast complex world ... a world in which I and most of the women I knew had been very happy to live.

Several years after that elegy, I began to write a book about lesbian desire. From my perspective, lesbian lust had been at the origin of the energy and the vision that brought that feminist world into being. My concerns were political and philosophical, but also personal. Lesbian desire—my fierce attraction to women—had been the single most powerful and transformative force in my life; it had also landed me in the worst kind of trouble. It was my guide and it misled me. I wanted to try and make some sense of this. Over time, what had begun as a meditation morphed into a memoir called *In Search of Pure Lust*.

At the heart of *In Search of Pure Lust* are the years I spent in Western Massachusetts as editor of the feminist review *Trivium: A Journal of Ideas*. For much of that time I lived in the house of radical feminist theologian Mary Daly, who was then writing *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (whence my title). My neighbors were Adrienne Rich, her partner Michelle Cliff (Audre Lorde was a frequent visitor at their house), and professor of medical ethics and women's studies Janice Raymond. It was a time when feminists were—for the very first time—not only exposing the global reach of misogyny and violence against women, but drawing connections between woman hatred and racism, militarism and violation of the earth. We were burning through all the old dualisms and paradigms, overruling all the male authorities who ever lived in our heads, and creating institutions (like the WRB) that would last in some cases for decades. Lesbians were the prime movers in all these domains.

I wrote my book over a period of fifteen years. At the beginning of those years parts of the world I was describing still existed; towards the end its last traces had all but vanished. What I/we had thought was a new world we could count on to be there for generations to come was turning out to be a very finite era, now part of history. "It's a longstanding tradition, not to say a historical rule," I had written in that earlier essay, "[that] as women,

our memories have a way of deserting us. As feminists, our lineage has been broken over and over again." What began as a writerly impulse to fill in scenes now became a historical impulse to provide period detail—so that generations to come could get a feel for the institutions we had created and the richness of our social and political lives. So that this lineage would not be broken.

In the interest of accuracy, the detail extended as well to our stumblings and failings, both personal and collective. The memoir traces my deepening consciousness of what was problematic in this movement. As editor of *Trivium* I had a front row seat on our conflicts and squabbles and divisions. Specifically, I witnessed the sex wars as well as the struggles over race and class and disability. We were among the first to come up with race, class, age and ableism analyses—but we often wielded our insights like bludgeons. And our thinking about sex work and pornography, at least among the women I knew, was often one-dimensional.

Similarly problematic were my own love relationships. Over time, after much anguish and with the help of a serious dive into Zen practice, my failures in love began to yield insight into what went wrong, not just personally, but collectively as a movement.

In many ways, *In Search of Pure Lust* is a requiem for the lesbian feminist movement I came up in. An extended meditation on lesbian desire, it ends on a note of forgiveness and of deep gratitude for having been part of a culture that supported my love and lust for women, that provided countless venues for me to act on them—and that allowed me, along with Emily D., to dwell in Possibility:

How easy it is now to look back at us, we desiring Lesbians of the seventies and eighties, and see only the quarrels, the betrayals, the fallings-out. For those of us on the inside, who expected nothing less than the world from each other, how difficult not to get stuck there....

How easy to forget, especially now that it's all but vanished, that we did create a world together. A culture of resistance. Those of us who weren't writing poems or essays or fiction, making films, art, videos, music, were founding journals, coffeehouses, bookstores, art galleries, theater companies, hosting book fairs and conferences and



Lise Weil

festivals. Together, we managed to give a shape to our needs, our values, our longings. To give weight and heft to our dreams.

How can I not marvel at all the possible we brought into being?...

How can I not love us for our wanting, our desiring, our aspiring? And in honoring the glorious soaring, how can I not forgive the ignominious crashing? (My own included.)

Desire is not a practice. It does not teach patience or sustainability. It does not teach kindness or understanding. (Whence comes kindness? And whence understanding? "From pain." My instinctual answer. The pain of losing what is most precious.) And yet Desire, deep desire, is the motor of transformation: what makes the possible possible. ♻️

Lise Weil was founder of *Trivium: A Journal of Ideas* (1982-1991) and of its online offshoot *Trivium: Voices of Feminism* (2003-2011). She is founder and editor of the online journal *Dark Matter: Women Witnessing*. Her memoir *In Search of Pure Lust* appeared in 2018 (She Writes Press, U.S.; Inanna Publications, Canada). She teaches in the Goddard College Graduate Institute, where she recently helped found a concentration in Embodiment Studies. Her website is www.liseweil.com



Download

Stay Engaged! Get Connected to
Women's Review of Books

Subscribers: Access an electronic version:
womensreviewofbooks.org/readonline