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Julie R. Enszer

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“Fighting to create and maintain our own Black women’s culture”: *Conditions Magazine, 1977–1990*

JULIE R. ENSZER

We wonder where the next meal, job, payment on our college loans and other bills, apartment, the first car, Black Woman-identified bookstore, health center, magazine, archives, bar, record company, newspaper, press, forty acres and a mule, or national conference are going to come from.

They will come
from us loving/speaking *to* our Black/Third World sisters, not *at* white women
They will come
from us taking the Black woman energy presently being used to legitimize your
movement
and fighting to create and maintain our own Black women’s culture, our own Black
feminist movement,
our own Third World lesbian nation.

—Lorraine Bethel, “What Chou Mean *We*, White Girl?”¹

Introduction

During the 1970s and the 1980s, lesbian-feminists created a vibrant lesbian print culture, participating in the creation, production, and distribution of books, chapbooks, journals, newspapers, and other printed materials.² Publishers such as the Women’s Press Collective in Oakland, California; Diana Press in Baltimore, Maryland; Daughters Publishing Company, Inc. in Vermont and New York City; and Naiad Books, initially in Reno, Nevada, began operating during the 1970s; in the 1980s, Kitchen Table Press, Aunt Lute, Spinsters Ink, and Firebrand Books joined lesbian and feminist publishing communities. Literary journals like *Amazon Quarterly*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *13th Moon*, and *Chrysalis* operated alongside an array of local newspapers and national news outlets

including *off our backs* and *Lesbian Connection*.³ Single editors and publishers or romantic couples founded and operated many of these journals; for example, partners Laurel Galana and Gina Covina founded *Amazon Quarterly*, and partners Catherine Nicholson and Harriet Desmoines founded *Sinister Wisdom*. Some of the publications, however, engaged an array of women as a collective or in other egalitarian structures. Literary journals offered outlets for lesbian and feminist creative work with language and art. The extensive publication of poetry during the 1970s in feminist and lesbian print culture reflected Audre Lorde's affirmation that "for women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence."⁴ It prompted Jan Clausen to declare, in 1982, that "poets are the movement," and T. V. Reed to argue that "poems are every bit as dramatic as these demonstrations, or as confrontations with police."⁵

This extraordinary output of creative material included a variety of newsletters and at least three periodicals created and produced by African American lesbians. From 1977 until 1983 in the New York City area, a collective of African American lesbians published *Azalea*, with Joan Gibbs acting as editor or key volunteer throughout the life of the journal. In the San Francisco Bay area, African American lesbians published two periodicals during the 1980s and early 1990s; from 1982 until 1984, Marlene Bonner published *Onyx*, and, from 1989 until 1993, a group of African American lesbians, including Lisbet Tellefsen, published the periodical *Ache*.⁶

In addition to these journals, *Conditions*, self-described as "a magazine of writing by women with an emphasis on writing by lesbians," is an important periodical in the history of feminist and African American print culture. *Conditions* published seventeen issues between 1976 and 1990.⁷ Initially conceived as a biannual journal, *Conditions* published annually from 1980 through 1990. Each issue of *Conditions* contains texts representing multiple genres: poetry, prose, essays, book reviews, and interviews. Four white women (Elly Bulkin, Jan Clausen, Irena Klepfisz, and Rima Shore) founded the journal in Brooklyn, New York; however, in the early 1980s, the editorial collective reconstituted itself from the white founders into a multiracial, multicultural lesbian collective. During the 1980s, Cheryl Clarke, an African American lesbian, assumed crucial leadership roles at *Conditions*, serving on the editorial collective from 1982 until 1990.

Conditions became a multiracial periodical that provided an important voice and publishing outlet for African American women and lesbians throughout the 1980s. Issues of *Conditions* represent an intersection of shared concerns among feminists, lesbians, and people of color with roots in transformative activist movements from the 1960s. *Conditions* addressed topics such as international solidarity, anti-imperialism, AIDS, poverty, racism, friendship, and political action, through fiction, poetry, essays, and book and art reviews. By situating *Conditions* in multiple intellectual conversations and various social, political, and racial formations, the continuing influence of diverse social movements on activists in the 1980s becomes visible.

Combining close textual readings with archival research, the essay notes four characteristics that position *Conditions* as a multiracial periodical with significant African American influence. First, in early issues of *Conditions*, the feminist founders engaged a vision of multiracial and multicultural feminism in the material they chose to publish. Second, the iconic fifth issue, *Conditions: Five—The Black Women's Issue*, generated critical new audiences for black women's creative work and contributed to the development of the field of Black Women's Studies; it also signaled the beginning of the internal change of the *Conditions* collective. Third, the transition from the founding all-white collective to a multicultural collective made explicit the values of *Conditions*. Finally, the cessation of *Conditions*—and the significance of that ending—marked social, political, and economical changes in the United States.

Understanding *Conditions* as a women-of-color-produced journal and elaborating how the collective came to be comprised primarily women of color highlights the values of a particular type of lesbian-feminist activism and challenges historical narratives of the women's liberation movement that frame it as primarily a project by, about, and for white women. This history of *Conditions* resists narratives that suggest a failure of feminism during the 1980s, supposedly for becoming inward looking and overly concerned with identity politics.⁸ Feminist investments in racial-ethnic formations were successful as a means of interrogating power and creating organizations to transform power relations between white women and women of color, institutionally and interpersonally. The story of *Conditions* highlights the possibilities that feminists imagined and created for multicultural, transformative, and visionary activism in the production of print culture.

The Early Years of *Conditions*

Two white lesbian couples started *Conditions* in 1976: Elly Bulkin and Jan Clausen, and Irena Klepfisz and Rima Shore. Three of the founders were Jewish (Bulkin, Klepfisz, and Shore); all four lived in Brooklyn. All were writers, sharing creative work and exploring ways to get their work and the work of other feminists in the hands of readers. In the first issue, *Conditions: One*, the four wrote, "We work collectively to select and edit material which will reflect women's perceptions of themselves, each other, the conditions of their lives, and of the world around them."⁹ In 1976, *Conditions* was first and foremost a journal for women's writing with an emphasis on writing by lesbians. All of the editors were lesbians, and the journal was feminist in its focus. This focus reflects the dynamic overlapping of feminism and lesbianism during the mid-1970s; lesbianism and feminism were mutually co-constitutive and not yet singularly hyphenated. In 1976, the editors reflected on their nascent project, "This collective process is a difficult one. We have found that the four of us

do not always agree or identify with viewpoints expressed by the women we publish, or with each other.”¹⁰ In spite of these disagreements, Bulkin, Clausen, Klepfisz, and Shore together produced five issues of the journal, through *Conditions: Six*. Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith guest-edited *Conditions: Five—The Black Women’s Issue*, published in the spring of 1980.

What and whom *Conditions* published demonstrated, from the first issue, commitments to multicultural and multiracial voices. In *Conditions: One*, Shore, Clausen, Bulkin, and Klepfisz published creative work by Wilmette Brown, an African American writer, and Lorraine Sutton, a Puerto Rican writer. In addition, they published the poem “Un Parto/A Birth,” by Ana Kowalkowsky, in the original Spanish with an English translation, establishing the significance of literature in translation for the journal. While these numbers are modest (the issue features eighteen authors overall), the reviews in the journal, which are over forty pages (over twenty-five per cent) of the 148-page journal, demonstrate an editorial commitment to engaging seriously work by women of color. One third of the nine reviews appraise work by women of color: Gloria T. Hull reviews Audre Lorde’s *Between Our Selves*; Lynne Reynolds reviews two books by Ntozake Shange; Sarah Pratt reviews Mitsuye Yamada’s *Camp Notes and Other Poems*. While this first issue did not predominantly feature women of color, works by and about women of color were included and represented in meaningful ways. Similar degrees of inclusion continued through the next three issues, as the editors continued to center work by women of color.

Conditions published an array of lesbian-feminist and feminist writers, constructing a multicultural community in each issue. From its first issue, *Conditions* established a wide readership through feminist and lesbian networks in New York and around the country. Publications in *Conditions* brought important exposure to these writers at crucial early points in their careers. For some writers—like Achy Obejas, Anna Freud Loewenstein, Amber Hollibaugh, Becky Birtha, Bonnie Zimmerman, Cherry Muhanji, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Jewelle Gomez, Dorothy Allison, Michelle Cliff, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Toi Dericotte—*Conditions* became one of their earliest publishing credits. Individual interactions of writers with editors also prompted future involvement with the journal; Moraga later served as office manager of the journal during the 1980s, and Allison joined the editorial collective. For more established writers, such as Adrienne Rich, Marilyn Hacker, Audre Lorde, Chrystos, Enid Dame, Alicia Ostriker, Hattie Gossett, Joy Harjo, and Margaret Randall, *Conditions* demonstrated their commitment to feminist publications as a way to reach an important audience.

From *Conditions: One* through *Conditions: Seventeen*, the editors gave conscious attention to race and ethnicity in the assembly of each issue. *Conditions* published what became some of the most influential works of black feminist criticism, including Barbara Smith’s “Toward a Black Feminist Critique” (*Conditions: Two*); Audre Lorde’s “Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist’s Response”

(*Conditions: Four*); and the crucial conversation among Cheryl Clarke, Jewelle L. Gomez, Evelyn Hammonds, Bonnie Johnson, and Linda Powell, titled “Black Women on Black Women Writers” (*Conditions: Nine*). In 2009, Farah Jasmine Griffin noted of Smith’s article in particular, “One need only chart the reception of Smith’s essay in the years since its publication to derive a sense of the development of and challenges to black feminist criticism, for her essay spawned an intertextual debate and dialogue that became central to the field.”¹¹ Ultimately, the material practices of *Conditions* over its fourteen years of publishing demonstrated feminist commitments to challenging racism, developing transformative feminist practices to empower women of color, and envisaging new collaborative practices among multicultural groups of women.

Addressing racism was a central concern in some lesbian-feminist communities, as evidenced by published works, personal writing, and political practices.¹² Lesbian print culture and its institutions grappled with the politics of race and power, sometimes productively and other times with intractable conflicts. For example, Audre Lorde served as poetry editor at *Chrysalis* during the late 1970s and found herself embroiled in a dispute with the editors; the parties never found resolution.¹³ By contrast, *Conditions* avoided such public conflicts in three ways. First, the founding editors composed early issues of *Conditions* by consciously engaging work by and about women of color. Second, two African American women edited the fifth issue of *Conditions: Five—The Black Women’s Issue*, published in 1979. (See Figure 1.) Finally, the subsequent transformation of the *Conditions* editorial collective from its four white founders to a multicultural group signaled a new era in American feminism and black print cultures.

Conditions: Five—The Black Women’s Issue

In the late 1970s, *Conditions* editors and other print culture activists initiated a guest editor model as a strategy to produce an issue that centered voices of African American women.¹⁴ This issue of *Conditions* emerged from broader struggles to create mechanisms to re-envision and transform institutions for meaningful power-sharing between white women and women of color. While some feminists, including Smith, critiqued this editorial model, its influence and the effects of *Conditions: Five* cannot be underestimated.¹⁵ *Conditions: Five* brought new attention to the work of African American women, particularly black lesbians, in ways similar to the effects of Toni Cade Bambara’s early publication of *The Black Woman* in 1970. *Conditions: Five* contributed to the fledgling field of Black Women’s Studies, and the issue’s success reinforced multicultural feminist practices for the *Conditions* collective.

conditions: five



the black women's issue

FIGURE 1. Cover of *Conditions: Five—The Black Women's Issue* (1979). Courtesy of Cheryl Clarke, on behalf of *Conditions*.

Barbara Smith and Lorraine Bethel edited *Conditions: Five—The Black Women's Issue* (1979). Clausen, Bulkin, Shore, and Klepfisz initially approached Smith and Gloria T. Hull about editing an issue. Hull declined, indicating that she did not have the time, but Smith agreed to edit in collaboration with Bethel.¹⁶ The guest editor model created the possibility for “so many new Black women writers” to be “published in a feminist publication for the first time.”¹⁷ Smith and Bethel explained, “This issue . . . clearly disproves the ‘non-existence’ of Black feminist and Black lesbian writers and challenges forever our invisibility, particularly in the feminist press.”¹⁸ The longest issue of *Conditions* to date, filling nearly two hundred pages, *Conditions: Five* includes the work of now iconic feminist and lesbian-feminist writers such as Gloria T. Hull, Donna K. Rushin, Donna Allegra, Toi Derricotte, Pat Parker, Alexis De Veaux, Audre Lorde, Ann Allen Shockley, Cheryl Clarke, and Mary Watkins, as well as lesser known writers including Chirlane McCray, Judy Simmons, and Ruth Farmer. Smith and Bethel gathered a powerful collection of writing by black women; *Conditions: Five* altered the imaginary for both established and newer African American feminist writers, and transformed the publishing landscape by disproving the idea that there were no black lesbian writers.

In addition to forming the longest issue to date, *Conditions: Five* had a print run larger than any previous issues of the journal. Of the initial run of five thousand copies, an astounding three thousand copies sold in the first three weeks. The collective ordered a second print run of five thousand copies in December 1979.¹⁹ It also completely sold out. *Conditions: Five* sold more copies than any other issue of the journal, ever; sales of this journal issue matched those of many trade paperback books. Smith described “distributing ten thousand copies of an alternative magazine without aid of major advertising or promotions” as “something of a miracle.”²⁰ Sales were curtailed only by supply and eventually by Smith’s 1983 release of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. *Home Girls* included selections from *Conditions: Five* and was published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

Conditions: Five was a watershed moment in lesbian-feminist publishing with wide effects on a variety of feminist publishing projects. The issue demonstrated the importance of, and the market for, a volume by and about African American women, foregrounding the success of later anthologies by feminists of color, such as *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) and *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us are Brave* (1982). This issue situated *Conditions* as a journal that pioneered important strategies for publishing and promoting work by African American lesbians. While *Conditions: Five* is the only issue dedicated to the elaboration of a particular racial-ethnic formation, *Conditions’s* multicultural commitments extended broadly to women of color, lesbians, working class and poor women, and women outside of the United States.

Transforming the *Conditions* Collective

The transformation of the *Conditions* editorial collective from the four white founders to a multicultural collective enacts a visionary feminist practice, enabling women of color to take editorial and administrative leadership for the journal. While *Conditions* itself is significant, the process of the editorial collective also is as important to the history of feminism and lesbian-feminism as the artifacts of the journal itself. The founding collective thoughtfully constructed and executed the transition to a multiracial, multiclass collective in partnership with women of color. This transformation exemplifies the thinking of some lesbian-feminists about creating conscious collectives that attended to race and class differences. Lesbian-feminists believed that transforming editorial collectives would transform the contents of feminist journals, providing women of color, along with poor and working class women greater access to participation in print culture. In the case of *Conditions*, the transformation worked.

Of course, the impetus for this transformation did not come only from the white founders. As Stanlie James, Frances Smith Foster, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall note in their introduction to *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women's Studies*, after the institutionalization of Black Studies in the 1960s, Black Women's Studies emerged in the academy during the 1970s and 1980s and "the most noteworthy developments in the evolving field of Black Women's Studies came from a multi-racial group of women."²¹ Within the broader feminist movement, women of color confronted white women about racism, holding them accountable for their misuse of power and privilege. Sometimes women of color confronted white women directly, as Barbara Smith did with the white editors and publishers of Persephone Press. Smith challenged Persephone's decision not to publish a book by African American writer Hattie Gossett, and she objected to particular behaviors of Gloria Z. Greenfield and Pat McGloin, which, Smith argued, devalued women of color authors.²²

In other instances, women of color confronted white women through creative work. Lorraine Bethel's poem "What Chou Mean *We*, White Girl?" in *Conditions: Five* (cited as the epigraph for this essay) captures some of the anger and frustration of African American lesbian-feminists. Bethel decries white women who want only token representation of "Third World women and lesbians."²³ She argues that these white women desire Third World women and lesbians to not "come as you are, / but as we'd like you to be; our worst fantasy / primal nightmare, our best dream."²⁴ Bethel reserves particular venom for white women who present themselves as "struggling revolutionaries" and yet also own "Volvos, country houses, town apartments."²⁵ In an "open letter to movement white girls," Bethel declares:

We're not doing that kind of work anymore
 educating white women
 teaching Colored Herstory 101
 on the job, off the job, in bed
 in bed
 letting lesbian/feminist racial transvestites
 radical chic European dykes wearing pouches and multiple earrings
 with no libations for Black female spirits
 pick our brain steal our culture, style, identities
 for free or below the minimum wage (for the revolutions, of course).²⁶

Dialogues between white women and women of color, like this one imagined by Bethel, appear frequently in lesbian-feminist print culture. For example, Pat Parker published "For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend," in her collection *Womanslaughter*. The poem begins, "The first thing you do is forget that I'm Black. / Second, you must never forget that I'm Black."²⁷ Similarly, Stephania Byrd, in her collection *A Footstep on a Distant Plain*, writes in the poem "Shiteaters":

It's sisterhood with no responsibilities
 possibilities
 or reason
 it's your shit and you see if I eat your shit
 Baby, it's death.²⁸

Staged performances of poetic dialogues that articulated points of anger and separation between white women and women of color played an important role in raising consciousness about the effects of racism on women of color and about white women's complicity in racist structures and practices. In light of this harsh and challenging rhetoric from women of color, expressing anger toward the actions of white women, it is difficult to imagine productive engagements between and among white women and women of color. Yet, they existed, and they transformed people. The transformation of the *Conditions* editorial collective reveals one powerful moment of change.

After five years of publishing with the original editorial collective and one special issue with guest editors, the *Conditions* collective transitioned, adding new members at the end of 1981. Elly Bulkin wrote to Minnie Bruce Pratt, "We had our first 'new collective' meeting last Saturday, though we're not quite through adding women. We have thus far added . . . Dorothy Allison, Cheryl Clarke, Jewelle Gomez, and Carroll Oliver. Cheryl and Carroll were part of the Black Feminist Retreat group connected with the Combahee River Collective."²⁹ Bulkin's note to Pratt demonstrates the conscious way that the editorial col-

lective approached the transition. Rather than adding one or two new collective members, they quickly added four members, three of whom were African American. Building a group of women of color within the editorial collective was the priority—and it was a valuable one for Bulkin. Members of the editorial collective recognized intuitively and explicitly that it was important to engage women of color as the majority of the collective for a true transformation. Bulkin continued, “We will add one, perhaps two more women of color who are not Afro-American. We’re meeting on Sunday with Mirtha Quintanales who seems very interested. So we are actually in the middle of (or most of the way toward) becoming a collective with a majority of women of color. I feel terrifically fortunate to be in the midst of it.”³⁰ Quintanales eventually joined the editorial collective. By 1984, all four members of the original editorial collective had moved on to other projects.

The editorial collective recruited new members from their social and political networks in the New York area. New member Dorothy Allison echoed Bulkin’s early excitement in her reflections on joining:

They [the women of the *Conditions* collective] were just wonderful, extraordinary women, and there were a lot of shared assumptions and shared understanding of what we were about and what the purpose of such a publication was. I didn’t have to fight as I had had to fight at *Quest* and *Amazing Grace*, and all the other publications I’d ever worked with, because *Conditions* had the same understanding about how the world changes. The world changes through story. The world changes through personal interaction. Education, yes, but it becomes more powerful and more effective if you make those personal connections, and there’s nothing more personal than story.³¹

Part of the success of the editorial collective transition may have been that women recruited to the collective were all active writers, working on their own literary and artistic work. In 1982, Allison, Clarke, Gomez, and Oliver were relatively unknown. Each of them brought to the editorial work a desire to participate in lesbian and feminist print culture and shape it for the future. Allison observed in one interview that, their enthusiasm aside, “the transition was not always easy.” She continues:

All those people actually wanted to retire as editors and put a new editorial board in place, which was marvelous and wise and feminist of them. They put together a mixed bunch of people who were not going to get along, and we had to work it out. I mean I was suddenly working with Yankee black women, and they looked at me like, Who is this cracker? And I’m like, Ooh, they’re going to eat me alive. And

pretty much, some of that happened. It was a hard transition to get to know each other, learn to trust each other. But we learned it doing the work and discovering that we all loved the work and took the work entirely seriously.³²

Allison's recollection of this period indicates that conflicts, particularly conflicts along the lines of race and class, were a part of the editorial collective during these years. Sometimes those tensions emerged in the pages of the journal through works such as Shay Youngblood's story "Spit in the Governor's Tea," which highlights black women's forms of resistance to white supremacy, and Pamela Sneed's poem "Rapunzel," which challenges white hegemony in fairy tales.³³

Shared political values also helped resolve tensions within the collective. Allison recalls, "we were all serious politicals."³⁴ Similarly, Cherríe Moraga, employed as the part-time office worker in 1982 and 1983, recalls her relationships with women of the collective as including not only "really good friendships," but also affiliations that "did political work together."³⁵ Shared commitments to lesbian-feminist political activism helped the collective sustain its work during the 1980s.

After the initial transition, the collective continued to change, adding new members as some moved on to different projects. In total, twenty-one women served on the editorial collective of *Conditions*; eight white women (thirty-eight per cent), six African American women (twenty-eight per cent), three Latina women (fourteen per cent), and one Asian American woman (five per cent). (Two racial-ethnic identities are unknown.) Cheryl Clarke joined the editorial collective in 1982 as a part of the initial transition and participated as a member of the editorial collective through the final issue in 1990. (See Figure 2.)

While the collective staunchly viewed its work as shared and participatory, Clarke took crucial leadership roles, congruent with editor-in-chief and publisher at other publications, from *Conditions: Nine* in 1983 through the final issue, *Conditions: Seventeen*, in 1990. Clarke's leadership helped to sustain the journal during difficult publishing and political environments, and Clarke assumed responsibility for the archives of *Conditions*.³⁶

The issues published under Clarke's leadership represent a compelling body of work from the multicultural, evolving editorial collective. From 1983 through 1990, *Conditions* published two issues focused on international writing, a retrospective issue that reprinted significant work from earlier issues, and a variety of open issues that showcased excellent feminist literary work. The covers of issues printed during this period are especially striking. Earlier issues of *Conditions* had representational artwork on the cover; after *Conditions: Nine* the cover art is graphic. Created by a variety of different artists including Gay Belknap, Anne Cammett, Dorothy Randall Gray, and Eve Sandler, the covers used jagged blocks of color and typographic treatment of the issue num-



FIGURE 2. Cheryl Clarke, reading from *Conditions: Seventeen*. Copyright Lynda Koolish, with permission.

ber and of the journal name. While earlier covers featured people or images that evoked people, later covers used a new visual language emerging from a transition in publishing: desktop printing and graphic design. This change in visual language also reflected new and reimagined lesbian identities as well as multicultural values of feminism, suggesting that a single image cannot capture the complexity of human experience.

While the transformation of the collective was thoughtful and intentional, other feminists scrutinized it. Mary Biggs expressed concerns in the *Women's Review of Books*, noting the editorial collective "seemed rather studiously diverse." She wondered, "Was this composition [two white Jewish women, one white Southern working-class woman, one Latina and three African-American women] as arbitrary, as ominously 'determined,' . . . as it first sounded to me?"³⁷ In spite of these concerns, she recognized *Conditions: Nine* as "a triumphant realization of nearly everything that *Conditions* set out to be." Clarke recalls the transition of the collective from the white founders to a multicultural group as "necessary" and something that "everyone was doing." She viewed it as an action by all involved to "practice what we are preaching" and to build a "new model for the intersections of culture."³⁸

Some narratives of feminist organizations founded in the 1970s emphasize racial exclusivity and the hegemony of white women activists as producers of feminist politics, theory, and culture. While the early years of *Conditions* support this narrative, the material practices of the collective in 1979, 1980, and beyond challenge it. The founding, all-white collective published *Conditions: Five* in conjunction with two African American guest editors. By giving the power and control of the journal to Smith and Bethel, the original collective affirmed their commitment to publishing, promoting, and distributing the voices of women of color. Then the founding collective transformed the editorial collective from an all-white collective to a multicultural, multiracial, multiclass collective. These interventions in anti-racist practices espoused by some people in the Women's Liberation Movements demonstrate how anti-racism and multiculturalism informed and shaped feminist theory and practice during this period. At *Conditions*, feminists successfully enacted theories and ideas about leadership by women of color and multicultural practices. As a result, *Conditions* was a significant feminist periodical, and, more importantly, its publishing work situates the journal as a significant periodical for African American women and African American lesbians.

Conditions: One Ending and Two Conclusions

Why did *Conditions* end? When *Conditions: Seventeen* was published in 1990, the intention of the collective was for the periodical to continue as an annual bound print anthology published by a feminist press.³⁹ Despite extensive corre-

spondence with feminist publishers in the United States, such an arrangement never materialized.⁴⁰ According to Clarke, the collective stopped publishing because they could not find new collective members, and the existing collective members were turning their attention to other projects, either individual writing or different professional directions.⁴¹ Collective members began to resign from the group and new members were not forthcoming. Moreover, it was becoming more and more difficult to find financial support for the journal and more and more expensive to publish it.⁴² After fourteen years and seventeen issues, *Conditions* ceased.

Throughout its fourteen years of publishing, *Conditions* struggled for its livelihood. The mid-1980s brought some success with grant-seeking; in particular, a grant from the New York State Arts Council provided crucial support for *Conditions* as did the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Chicago Resource Center, the Astraea Foundation, the Combined Federal Campaign, and National Community Funds.⁴³ The collective organized successful readings that raised additional financial support, but the collective was always on tenterhooks about paying bills, staff, and rent. In addition, during the 1980s a grant from the New York State Arts Council raised questions about the propriety of a state agency's support of a lesbian organization, initiating a debate about arts funding that continued at a national level in 1990 with the National Endowment for the Arts.⁴⁴ The effects of economic issues on *Conditions*, particularly the changing mechanisms for public support of the arts during the Reagan administration as well as the consolidation of publishing media during the 1980s, created an increasingly hostile environment for small publications. This economic reality, combined with changes in feminist and lesbian and gay social movements, contributed to the end of *Conditions*.

The legacy of *Conditions* is important for a number of reasons. First, the transition of the editorial collective is a significant achievement for feminist theory and practice during the 1980s. Second, the *Conditions* collective produced a cultural journal that consistently and positively influenced the literary field for lesbians and heterosexual women of all racial-ethnic backgrounds and nationalities. Third, the material practices of the *Conditions* collective invite a reappraisal of lesbian separatism in the 1980s.

Although *Conditions* was a feminist journal, as distinguished from a lesbian journal, during its entire fourteen years the collective was all lesbian. In spite of this fact, Cheryl Clarke maintains that the journal was not a separatist enterprise because, to her, "separatism is a world view that you can be around only women and a bullshit essentialism."⁴⁵ While I appreciate Clarke's critique of separatism, by publishing only women and maintaining an all lesbian collective, *Conditions* enacted a form of lesbian separatism. The gender and sexual orientation exclusivity of the collective built a cohesion and a sustainability that effectively published the journal for fourteen years. The *Conditions* collec-

tive exemplified how lesbian separatism provided an extraordinarily generative environment not only for its members but also for feminism more broadly.

Casting *Conditions* as engaged in a productive practice of lesbian separatism and simultaneously as produced by a multicultural collective of lesbians refutes ideas that lesbian separatism is exclusively a construction and practice of white women and that it is *prima facie* racist. Some of these ideas about lesbian separatism emanate from the Combahee River Collective statement from 1977. The Combahee River Collective wrote, "We reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us." Part of the rejection emanated from the idea that white women separatists advocated "fractionalization" from black men, women, and children. Another element of the rejection was "biological determinism." The collective explained, "We must also question whether lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race."⁴⁶ While the collective questioned the effectiveness of lesbian separatism, the work of *Conditions* during the 1980s demonstrates the significance of an operational, multiracial, lesbian-only collective.

In 1977, four white lesbians set out to "select and edit material which will reflect women's perceptions of themselves, each other, the conditions of their lives, and of the world around them."⁴⁷ In 1990, the journal continued to do that work with a multicultural editorial collective led by an African American lesbian. That narrative alone conveys some of the significant transformations of feminism during the preceding decade and a half. The pages of *Conditions* itself, and the material conditions behind the journal, demonstrate some of the vibrant changes that African American lesbians ushered into American (black) print culture—and demonstrate as well as some of the challenges *Conditions* continually faced for survival.

NOTES

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¹ Lorraine Bethel, "What Chou Mean We, White Girl?" *Conditions: Five / The Black Women's Issue* (1979): 89.

² See for example, Kate Adams, “Built Out of Books—Lesbian Energy and Feminist Ideology in Alternative Publishing,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 34, no. 3 (1998): 113–41; Trysh Travis, “The Women in Print Movement: History and Implications,” *Book History* 11 (2008): 275–300; and Jan Whitt, “A ‘Labor from the Heart’: Lesbian Magazines from 1947–1994,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 5, nos. 1/2 (2001): 229–51.

³ Agatha Beins, “Free Our Sisters, Free Ourselves: Locating U.S. Feminism through Feminist Periodicals, 1970–1983” (PhD diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2011).

⁴ Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 37.

⁵ Jan Clausen, *A Movement of Poets: Thoughts on Poetry and Feminism* (Brooklyn, NY: Long Haul Press, 1982), 1; T. V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 77.

⁶ Rodger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995); Heather Cassell, “Black lesbians display their Sapphic History,” *The Bay Area Reporter*, December 17, 2009. The San Francisco Public Library has a complete collection of *Ache*; the June L. Mazer Archives in Los Angeles has a complete collection of *Azalea*. In general, however, these publications are not widely available.

⁷ Digital copies of all of issues of *Conditions* are available at the Lesbian Poetry Archive, <http://www.lesbianpoetryarchive.org/conditions>.

⁸ See, for example, Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women’s Movement in America Since 1960* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁹ *Conditions: One*, front matter, n.p.

¹⁰ *Conditions: One*, front matter, n.p.

¹¹ Farah Jasmine Griffin, “That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black Feminist Literary Criticism,” in *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women’s Studies*, ed. Stanlie M. James, Frances Smith Foster, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, (New York: The Feminist Press, 2009), 336–60, 343.

¹² See, for example, Joan Gibbs and Sara Bennett, *Top Ranking: A Collection of Articles on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community* (New York: Come!Unity Press, 1980); Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981; Brooklyn, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983); Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Rebellion: Essays 1980–1991* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1992); Mab Segrest, *My Mama’s Dead Squirrel* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1985); and Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith, *Yours In Struggle* (Brooklyn, NY: Long Haul Press, 1984).

¹³ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968–1996,” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2010).

¹⁴ *Heresies*, a feminist art journal, also used guest editorial collectives to create special issues on lesbians in 1977 and Third World Women in 1979; the latter special issue of *Heresies* was published just before *Conditions: Five*.

¹⁵ Barbara Smith, “A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 10, no. 3 (1989): 11–13.

¹⁶ Barbara Smith, “Introduction,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table: Woman of Color Press, 1983), xlviii.

¹⁷ Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith, “Introduction,” *Conditions: Five* (1979): n.p.

¹⁸ Bethel and Smith, “Introduction,” n.p.

¹⁹ Smith, “Introduction,” xlviii.

²⁰ Smith, “Introduction,” xlviii.

²¹ James, Foster, and Guy-Sheftall, *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women’s Studies*, xiii.

²² Barbara Smith and Cherríe Moraga, "Letter to Gloria Z. Greenfield and Pat McGloin," Folder "Smith, Barbara," Carton 4, Persephone Press Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

²³ Bethel, "What Chou," 86.

²⁴ Bethel, "What Chou," 87.

²⁵ Bethel, "What Chou," 87.

²⁶ Bethel, "What Chou," 88–89.

²⁷ Pat Parker, *Womanslaughter* (Oakland, CA: Diana Press, 1978), 13.

²⁸ Stephanie Byrd, *A Distant Footstep on the Plain*, n.p., 1981. Byrd's two chapbooks are available at the Lesbian Poetry Archive, <http://www.lesbianpoetryarchive.org/node/300>.

²⁹ Elly Bulkin, "Letter to Minnie Bruce Pratt," November 23, 1981., Folder "Elly Bulkin, 1980–2005," boxes 52 and 53, Minnie Bruce Pratt Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

³⁰ Bulkin, "Letter."

³¹ Dorothy Allison, Interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, November 19, 2007, Voices of Feminist Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, 67.

³² Allison, 67–68.

³³ Shay Youngblood, "Spit in the Governor's Tea," *Conditions: Fifteen* (1988): 23–32; Pamela Sneed, "Rapunzel," *Conditions: Fifteen* (1988): 73.

³⁴ Allison, Interview, 67.

³⁵ Cherríe Moraga, Interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, June 7, 2005, Voices of Feminist Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, 73–74.

³⁶ Julie R. Enszer, "Twenty-One Boxes of Back Issues: A Summer of Preserving Literary History," *Lambda Literary*, August 19, 2012.

³⁷ Mary Biggs, "Conditions' Traditions," *Women's Review of Books* 1, no. 7 (April 1984): 8.

³⁸ Cheryl Clarke, Interview with the author, May 20, 2012, Jersey City, NJ.

³⁹ Conditions Editorial Collective, *Conditions: Seventeen* (1990): n.p.

⁴⁰ Cheryl Clarke, Correspondence, Cheryl Clarke Papers, Schomburg Library, New York Public Library.

⁴¹ Clarke, Interview.

⁴² Clarke, Interview.

⁴³ Cheryl Clarke, Unnamed document, Folder "Professional/Organizations/Conditions Grant Material," Cheryl Clarke Papers, Schomburg Library, New York Public Library.

⁴⁴ Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Poetry in Time of War," *Rebellion: Essays 1980–1991* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1992), 227–46; Barbara Smith, "The NEA is the Least of It," in *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 116–23; Cheryl Clarke, "Letter to Editor of *New York Post*," March 26, 1988, Cheryl Clarke Papers, Schomburg Library, New York Public Library.

⁴⁵ Clark, Interview.

⁴⁶ Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *This Bridge Called My Back* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 214. Clarke attended some of the Black Feminist Gatherings, but she was not a member of the Collective.

⁴⁷ Conditions Editorial Collective, *Conditions: Seventeen* (1990): n.p.