

Letters to L

Paranoia and Visions

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Contents

I	3
II.	4
III.	6

In these words exchanged between women who had up until then remained mute, something had taken shape which would remain part of the feminist tradition: a certain intimate and familiar relationship with the sphere of the perceptible, a coming and going between concreteness and abstraction that cracked the smooth surface of the discourses that legitimate power.

F.C., *Sonogram of a Potentiality*

Society has made us sick, let us strike a death-blow to society!

Sozialistisches Patientenkollektiv (SPK)

I.

Dear L,

We share a bed, we read together at the cafe. Under the table you squeeze my hand when M says something about turning the other cheek. I take it as a promise or a pact, a sign that we will have our own secrets. We sit next to each other on the floor at the first meeting and I see how much you like it when people laugh at your jokes. I see your happiness unfolding itself like crumpled paper.

Dear L,

I don't know why you let B treat you that way. I know that he hates women. I know he cheats on his wife, and takes off his ring when he goes to the bars, and I know he tried to sleep with one of his students at my party. I know he wanted to sleep with me that night in the city, when he asked me back to his hotel.

He said your poems were mediocre, and you cried, but I don't know why you respect him at all.

Dear L,

You stay over at my new place when you don't have work the next day. We go out for burritos and midnight movies. Or I cook and you wash the dishes; you say why bother trying to cook when it's just one more thing you'll be bad at.

I know you think of me as someone who is too normal, someone for whom things work out too easily. You have the perfect relationship, you say. But you rarely ask how I am doing, and I rarely bring it up.

Dear L,

I'm learning to hold my tongue when you fight with M because you always reconcile. He calls you five or six times a day sometimes, he needs something from you. He knows something is happening, he can see there are things you talk about with us that you don't tell him. He always wants to hear about the meetings even though he knows better than to ask directly.

Dear L,

I could be imagining it but you seemed aloof at the last meeting. You dyed your hair darker and I complimented you on the style, but you seemed insecure. You said you'd quit smoking.

I don't understand why you slipped out early, with a quick goodbye, instead of staying the night like we'd planned. I got a last-minute ride back home, you said, and I better take it. But I could have driven you tomorrow, I said.

Dear L,

You stopped coming to our meetings. I know, your car broke down and your work schedule changed, and besides, you've always been terrible at planning anything in advance.

I wonder what kind of secrets you keep, because you've always kept secrets, for the sake of appearances, and especially to avoid a fight. I think you are trying to get away from all of us, the people who lay claim to pieces of you. You wish we would just get along, stop coming to you with resentments and demands, stop asking you to take sides.

Dear L,

M is friends with J and J is friends with O and O is friends with B and H. M and J are writing something together, and M just joined J's literary group, which also includes N and R. A is publishing a piece in G's anthology, he's in contact with the famous P, and he's reading at the forum with O and J.

I can see why you chose M, why you need him, what he has that we don't have. They have everything; we have nothing without them. I know why you stopped coming to the meetings.

II.

To be a feminist is to be a paranoid. Everyone tells us that we are reading into things too much, that what we are seeing isn't there. There are certain emotional registers with which we become familiar: skepticism, mistrust, defensiveness.

Our reactions are never proportionate to the actions that preceded them.

On the one hand, the abstract. *Men rape women. Sometimes the configuration is different, sometimes gender violence takes other forms. But the pattern remains: men rape women, over and over and over and over and over.*

On the other hand, the concrete. *He raped me. He was really drunk, and I was really drunk. He left a mark, on my thigh. I know he's messed up, I know something really bad happened to him when he was a kid. He told me he's in therapy.*

Our anger is experienced by others as uninteresting, as formulaic. Sometimes we too become bored with our performance of indignation. *I object*, we say, again and again, and our mouths ache.

Woman: she who is asked to resolve an irresolvable contradiction, or upon whom is placed the burden of hiding its irresolvability, or she who is blamed for her failure to resolve it or to hide it.

Is this the world you want, others ask, a world of judgment, ethical norms, and punishment? Can't you see this solves nothing?

The intensity of emotion that we express – which seems so excessive as to be named hysterical or insincere – is a result of this contradiction.

We know the radiation's source, we know where the leak occurred. We can measure the levels at the site. But the further we get from the site, the more diffuse and dispersed the radiation becomes. We do not know how the force penetrates specific life-forms, how it alters their

composition over time, how it contributes to a slow death years later. We know that there is a relationship between the radiation and the particular fates of those exposed – we can detect abnormal rates of illness – but we cannot trace it directly. Death and illness dispersed over time and space appear as purely individual destinies.

This is the way that gender relations appear. Radiating, condensing, making ill.

No, that is not the world we want.

But is not possible for us to avoid certain emotional registers, certain mundane postures. The alternative to anger is despair, it is shades of self-obliteration too bleak to bear.

It is not that we addressed the problem incorrectly but that there is no correct way to address the problem. *It is the social relation that produces us as women with problems, and as men who create problems, that is the problem.*

To live as a woman is to live out the consequences of a contradiction between the private and the social, the concrete and the abstract, the specificity of an individual life and the general pattern that constitutes a group's life.

To embrace the gestures of the feminist is to live as a paranoid, insofar as the social consequences of perceiving as real that which the whole of society denies are the same whether or not those perceptions are true. The contradiction becomes a personal secret, something we must pretend not to perceive when in the presence of others. To others there is no contradiction. Individual reactions are proportionate to the actions that preceded them.

There is no thing, no object called The Radiation, that we can attack. There are only the life-forms that have been exposed to it, whose cells have been altered invisibly, whose bodies have been indelibly marked in ways that unfold mysteriously over time, each distorted in its own way.

There is no thing called Men that we can attack. There are only individual men, there are only individual instances of violence, there are only specific experiences that we accumulate all of our lives, each unique but in some ways alike, like dust on a sill, slowly sedimenting.

Beatings, accountability processes, banishment, forgiveness: these are different ways that milieus attempt to deal with gender violence. The beatings do not work, the accountability processes do not work, banishment does not work, forgiveness does not work.

The fact that sometimes a woman chooses a violent response suggests that of all the impossible choices given to her, she has opted for the one that expresses the actual degree of hostility at the level of the social group – that is, the hostility of women as a group against the domination of men as a group.

The problem for women is not just uncovering what is political in the personal and personal in the political; it is finding a way to live inside of a contradiction wherein we experience simultaneously the concrete and the abstract nature of gender relations. This way of living is always unsatisfactory, and it is that fact – the fact of our own dissatisfaction, of the impossibility of fitting our lives within the paradigms we are given for them – that forms the material for our resistance.

At some point we begin looking for others suffering from our condition. Others with whom our private hallucinations can be recast as social, and with whom the impossibility of our position forms the foundation for a kind of sharing between the insane.

It is hard to trust each other.

In our terrible communities, when we side with each other we lose access to certain people, to certain men, and to the people to whom those men have access. The more ties we cut the less important we become and the more ties we lose. The lines that run between us, connecting all the men and the not-men together, form a web of allegiances and antagonisms, and we begin to learn that to put each other first has consequences. Brutally, we learn that in extricating ourselves from certain bonds we will make ourselves undesirable to men, and that this will make us utterly and finally invisible.

We will lose many of our friendships with women.

They will not want to be invisible, or undesirable. They will see how we look through the men's eyes – ugly, hysterical, boring – and they will be repulsed. They will stop coming to our meetings.

They will hate us much more than they hate the men; we must be ready for that.

III.

Dear L,

When I was a girl I dreamt about a landscape I had never seen, and in the dream I moved across it from left to right as it changed from desert cliffs to cracked earth to a black lake with an island in it. The lake was silent and the water was so quiet it seemed solid. I saw this lake inside you and there were times when its silence scared me and kept me back. I was always scared to get close to women because they see too much. They can see the radiation and I was afraid they would see the silence inside me, a black pool of water spilling over a cement lip. Men can be easier, I feel less scrutinized, less scrubbed over like pumice on raw skin. I wanted us to be like two new friends in recovery, tentative, handling each other gently. I wanted to be understood and to be recognized without being named, wild and bright. The emotions careening around inside my body's walls, echoes reverberating like sonar, the bat of my fear senses all without seeing. Wings spread inside me, I wanted you to see me and know me, but it didn't work out that way.

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