Living as a Lesbian

My heading titles a 1986 volume of Cheryl Clarke’s poems, republished in 2014 in the “sapphic classics” series of Sinister Wisdom and A Midsummer Night’s Press.1 “Living as a Lesbian” also is the title of an essay in Robert Reid-Pharr’s 2001 Black Gay Man.2 The echo is intended: Reid-Pharr names Clarke on the opening page of his essay (153); he quotes lines from Living as a Lesbian several times (on 155, 157, 158, 160, and 161). A mention of “Cheryl” in the context of “dyke parties in Brooklyn” that he attends (157) seems likely to refer to her.3 “Cheryl phones” (160), looking to borrow money, echoing a situation in “no more encomiums,” the poem from Living as a Lesbian cited most frequently in Reid-Pharr’s essay (the poem recalls an argument with a former lover “over some money I owed her” [54]). “We are a couple,” Reid-Pharr writes of himself and Cheryl; they are coupled as well in sharing the phrase “living as a lesbian.” “We are a couple, mentioned in one breath as dinner parties are planned, given to public quarrels over the minutiae of everyday

1 All parenthetical citations are from Cheryl Clark, Living as a Lesbian (New York: A Midsummer Night’s Press; Berkeley, CA: Sinister Wisdom, 2014).


3 It does not, as Robert Reid-Pharr informed me in an email on May 3, 2018: “One small matter that I think you might want to just ignore. The Cheryl referenced in my piece is, in fact, Cheryl Dunye[,] not Cheryl Clarke herself, but I always liked and provoked the confusion.” I am taking Robert’s advice, and leaving my significantly erroneous supposition in the text.
life, constantly aware of each other’s steps and jealous of the intrusion of outsiders” (160–1). This sounds like the usual use of “couple,” and yet: Reid-Pharr refers to their coupling as “our lesbianism” (161). What could that mean as a description of a black gay man and a woman who has identified as a black lesbian since she came out in 1979, and continues to do so, as she affirms in “Lesbianism, 2000”?4 However, Clarke insists there that “lesbianism has emerged at this time in my life as more of a strategy and less of a hard-and-fixed-identity-politics-that-I-am-going-to-be-no-matter-how-it-gets-deconstructed. One never knows how one may have to ‘live as a lesbian’” (383). That statement is, in fact, consistent with what Clarke affirmed in her much-cited 1981 essay “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” often taken as an example of fixed identity politics: “There is no one kind of lesbian, no one kind of lesbian behavior, and no one kind of lesbian relationship” (27). Would that affirmation embrace the identification espoused by Reid-Pharr?

A way to approach this question resides, I think, in the “as” of the shared title of Clarke’s book of poems and Reid-Pharr’s essay. Living as a lesbian is not the same thing as being a lesbian. Clarke’s lesbianism seems necessarily attached to her gender if we follow the definition of “lesbian” offered in “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance”: “[A] woman…who says she is” (26). This definition certainly allows great latitude in how one claims “lesbian,” but would nonetheless seem to require being a woman as a non-negotiable prerequisite, as much a bottom line as the nominal “man” is in the title of Reid-Pharr’s book. Clarke also affirms lesbianism as “an ideological, political, and philosophical means of liberation of all women from heterosexual tyranny” (27). She extends this galvanizing formulation for radical feminism beyond women in her equally much-cited 1983 essay, “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community.” There she imagines black gay men and lesbians as threats to and threatened by the heterosexist domination

4 All parenthetical citations are from prose and poems not in Living as a Lesbian are drawn from Cheryl Clarke, The Days of Good Looks: The Prose and Poetry of Cheryl Clarke, 1980 to 2005 (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006).
that characterizes patriarchy in general (and by black men who make such claims in the name of the black community). Clarke reiterates this point in the 2000 essay on lesbianism when she writes that “with the exception of black gay men, black men have not affirmed their solidarity with black women,” only to add a caveat, “and even black gay men must continue to check their masculinist tendencies and male privilege” (390). “Feminism still means roughly: the revolution that will liberate all women (and men) from patriarchal oppression” (382).

Reid-Pharr heeds these words as he opens the Coda to his essay:

> By becoming lesbian I have done nothing more nor less than become myself.

I had expected to end this piece with these words, forcing all of us, myself included, to reevaluate what it means to be labeled lesbian, gay, straight, bi, transgendered, asexual. And yet this is not enough. For, even as I recognize the difficulty of giving definition and meaning to our various identities, I also realize that as I struggle to lay claim to my lesbianism I am always confronted with the reality of my own masculinity, this strange and complex identity that I continue to have difficulty recognizing as privilege. (162)

This paragraph seems straightforward enough; however, certain echoes in the writing destabilize its crucial terms. How does the “myself” of the italicized sentence relate to the “myself included” of the sentence that follows? The first “myself” is the self one is, or, at least, becomes, while the second “myself” is pluralized, forced, moreover, to confront itself and its presuppositions about itself. This confrontation is staged by the impossibility that a black gay man could become himself as lesbian because of the “reality” of his “own masculinity,” yet this “reality” is challenged by the realization that “our various identities” are difficult to define. Is the ability to “recognize” the variousness and variegatedness of “our … identities” one with the difficulty in “recognizing” masculinity as a privilege when his masculinity also is a strange and complex, non-singular reality? Indeed, who
is included in the “our” of “our various identities”? These questions are all about “as,” about identifications and the identical when the same word seems to split in two. The resemblance is like that couple constituted by Reid-Pharr’s “I” and “Cheryl”: “I respect her boyishness as she cherishes my effeminacy. We are a couple” (160) joined through an “as.” At least adjectively, they exchange identities that seem substantial, nominative—man/woman—in which gender comes closer to being an “as” than the category at which deconstruction halts.

Reid-Pharr’s “Living as a Lesbian” offers an account of how he became a lesbian, though to put it that way errs in suggesting that the essay has a conventional narrative structure. In fact, it loops the way the opening of the Coda does. The initial sentence of the essay, “In 1985 Barbara Smith came like a fresh wind to Chapel Hill” (153), recurs (on 159 and 161) and is the final sentence of the essay. 1985 was, I suppose, the year that 20-year-old Reid-Pharr started college at unc and heard Smith speak (the “like” that makes the event a simile ushers us into the “as” where the essay exists). She enters the text as text a bit later in the first of several citations of Smith, this one from the Combahee River Collective that Smith had helped found a decade before. (Reid-Pharr cites the manifesto from its printing in Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, edited by Smith and published by Kitchen Table Women of Color Press that Smith founded and ran for a number of years; the important anthology This Bridge Called My Back: Writings of Radical Women of Color as well as Audre Lorde’s I am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities were other crucial Kitchen Table publications.) Reid-Pharr’s citation from the Combahee River Collective includes the central goal of the group: “[S]truggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression” (words also cited by Clarke in her essay on lesbianism as resistance [27]); he continues the citation to the end of the sentence, which insists on “the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocked” (154). “Interlocked,” but not identical, joined as with an “as”; so, too, Clarke draws analogies between the oppression of women and class and racial oppression. Because of the interlocking of oppressions, Clarke insists that “all of us have to accept or reject allies on the basis of politics, not on the specious basis of skin
color. *Have not black people suffered betrayal from our own people?*” (38).

Reid-Pharr allies his lesbianism with all the women he knows; his litany of names concludes with “Barbara, the mother of us all” (157), a tribute that echoes his mention of Lorde earlier: “Audre Lorde, Audre: Poet, Mother, Sister, Lesbian, Warrior, Cancer Survivor” (155).

The naming of Smith as “mother of us all” (all we home girls) is followed by another citation from her writing. Reid-Pharr alludes to his bookcases and files, filled with *Sinister Wisdom, Black Lesbians* and the like; the gay male writing he owns (most of it porn), he reports, he keeps under his bed. One set of writing is the place to go to think about sexuality, the other is connected to having sex; Reid-Pharr thus ponders whether in the bath house he is “still lesbian”: “Is it lesbianism that spills out of the end of my cock as bald-headed men with grizzled beards and homemade tattoos slap my buttocks and laugh triumphantly? Is it lesbianism that allows me to walk these difficult streets alone, afraid only that I will not be seen, accosted, ‘forced’ into sexual adventure?” (162). Perhaps Samuel Delaney’s *Motion of Light on Water*, the instigator of Reid-Pharr’s first visit to the baths, figures in these questions, along with his wondering whether he is “not lesbian at all, but rather like a drag queen: by day a more or less effeminate, woman-loving gay man, by night a pussy, a buck” (163). “Like” or “as,” by day or night, the identities he affirms keep crossing each other.

Reid-Pharr’s second citation from Smith alludes to writing by black lesbians who “have found the courage to commit their lives and words to paper” as “miraculous” (157). In the Introduction to the 2014 edition of *Living as a Lesbian*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes of a kind of miracle: “even before I read *Living as a Lesbian* I was living inside it” (15). In the afterword to its republication, Clarke comments on the appropriateness of her book becoming a “sapphic classic[]”: she had read the classical Sophocles and Euripides early; “Sappho came much, much later, as we contemporary cunnilinguists fashioned our own sapphic verse” (128). Her pun resonates against the citation of the opening stanza from “sexual preference” as it appears in Reid-Pharr’s “Living as a Lesbian”:
I'm a queer lesbian.
Please don't go down on me yet.
I do not prefer cunnilingus.
(There's room for me in the movement.) (160)

It follows a citation from a poem written by Reid-Pharr; his lover at the time found it objectionable for the line “Like a cat” used to describe a man’s sexual position, “Ass lifted toward heaven,” but referring as easily grammatically to the I of the poem doing the fucking. “We broke up. I left for the comfort of my girl friends. He started dating women…both…finding our own deepest desires had turned back on themselves” (160). Like. As. Turning back and forward and coinciding.

What does it mean for a gay man to be “living as a lesbian”? For Reid-Pharr it is to be continually in process towards an identity one will never achieve. Clarke points in a similar direction when she uses the phrase “living as a lesbian” over and again to title her poems, recontextualizing the phrase each time (e.g., “living as a lesbian underground: a futuristic fantasy,” “living as a lesbian on the make,” “living as a lesbian at 35,” “living as a lesbian at 45,” “living as a lesbian underground fin de siecle”). “Living as a lesbian at 45” recalls “a frequent dream” of sex with a man which lead her to her writing: “and you may have work like poetry/to do like now” (296). This dream corresponds to her life: “In 1973, after four years of reckless heterosexuality, I collided high speed with lesbians and lesbianism” (386). There was a “before I became a lesbian”; in 2000 she is “inclined to embellish this narrative [of before and after] with the fact of my relationship with a jazz-loving, freaky, myopic white boy that helped me cross over the burning sands of group disapproval/dissension” (387). This white boy sounds like one of Reid-Pharr’s “favorite sex partners, Rick, an ugly, poor, white trash southerner” (9). “When we are together, we imagine, if only for a moment, a world transformed, a world so incredibly sexy and hot that the stupid, banal, and costly structures of racism, homophobia, poverty, and disease that work to keep us apart become nothing more than dully painful memories from the past” (12).
Living as a lesbian leads Reid-Pharr to the “as” of identifications that create identity that preserve difference at the same time, locations, locutions, in a real that allows for realizations that always put pressure on the real, its categories, its temporality. “What I know for certain is that this self, this lesbian-identified gay man, is in constant flux. I live like a lesbian, as a lesbian because I know no better way of life. Still, I live beyond her in a province that continues to be preserved exclusively for men, all the while reaping the many fruits of sexual apartheid” (163). This certainty and this place are rephrased as the essay concludes as “the limitlessness of my boundaries” (163), a paradoxical locution, location (“Mira Loca,” 156) that transgresses and affirms the contradiction housed in its key words and encapsulated in an “I” and a “my” that seeks a home, a mother whose breath was “like a fresh wind” or, better, like words on a page.

Cunning linguistics.

“Once home was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother’s mouth…. There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother’s blood.”5 “In 1985 Barbara Smith came like a fresh wind to Chapel Hill.”
