

The Front Page

May 10-23, 1983 Vol. 4, No. 8

Lesbian Poet & Activist Minnie Bruce Pratt

by Ann Holder, Gay Community News

Minnie Bruce Pratt is a woman who speaks up, and in the act of speaking embodies a challenge to the conventions of the culture she comes from. Minnie Bruce Pratt is a white, southern lesbian. She is a poet, born and raised in Alabama, now living in North Carolina. For the last several years she has been doing research on the history of the Ku Klux Klan.

In a recent interview, she explained that the impetus for the research came from the 1979 murders of five Communist Workers Party members in Geensboro, N.C. The subsequent trial led to acquittal of the Klansmen, even though their actions during the shooting were recorded on film and shown nationwide. In thinking about the history of Klan violence, in the aftermath of the shootings, she began to realize how many people, herself included, fall outside the Klan definition of acceptability into "the group defined as less than human-alien."

By taking up this work, Pratt consciously positions herself within a long history of women who have resisted the terms of womanhood imposed by white, southern society. Women like Lilian Smith are part of a little-known but powerful tradition which rejected the rule of white supremacy and implicitly challenged the myth of white, southern womanhood. Pratt is now part of a five woman collective which publishes a journal called *feminary* ("A Feminist Journal For the South Emphasizing Lesbian Visions"). The intention of the *Feminary* women is to deepen and enrich that historical legacy by making explicit connections between race, gender, sexuality and living in the South.

Pratt says that more than anything else, her work on the Klan has driven home a sense of the connectedness between many different forms of oppression. The Klan, she says, "is very consistent in their analysis of who is to be protected and who is to be thrown out...we have a lot to learn about our organizing from the recognition (that) as an ideology it makes a whole lot of connections between different oppressions."

The violence and rhetoric of the Klan has primarily been associated with attacks on black people and other people of color. Yet, as Pratt points out, shooting targets at

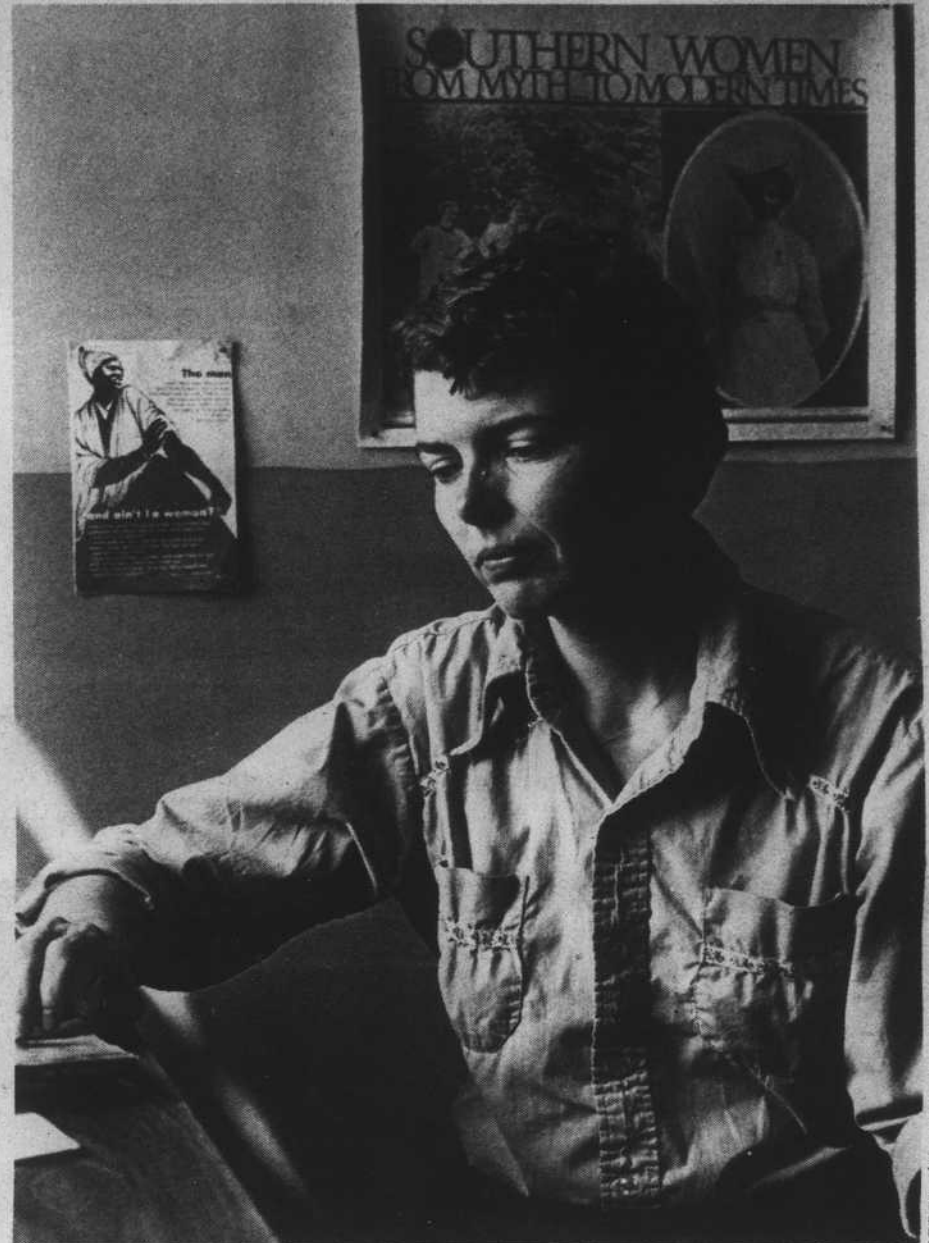
paramilitary Klan training camps are also identified as Jew, homosexual, communist, union organizer, Catholic. This diversity demonstrates the historical consistency of the Klan opposition to *all* who are defined by the term as different or other, as well as reflecting a need for an organizing strategy which stresses connections.

Klan hatred of homosexuals has very clear origins in the early Klan ideals of "purity" and attacks on "perversity." The Klan constituted itself as a guardian of public morality especially in "protecting" white womanhood. The lynchings of black men for alleged sexual crimes was accompanied by the beating or tar-and-feathering of white women for "loose" sexual conduct and lynching of white men for "perversity." The rape of black women was used by the Klan as an instrument of terror against the black community. The Klan ideals of sexual and racial purity formed a complex tangle which is still evident in the Klan literature and activity today.

To Pratt, the practical work of organizing against such a complicated and perverse range of hatred includes "the difficulty of bringing all the pieces together." So when she speaks to audiences about the Klan, she does so as a feminist and a lesbian. She insists upon making the connections between all the groups under attack by the Klan. While this is not always easy, or even something audiences want to hear, Pratt sees it as essential to "understanding what the Klan says about hatred and violence in our culture." She has learned the political and personal necessity of "not denying your own oppression." One of the most important things to do, she said, is to "speak up for what would happen to me and to be clear about asking other people to acknowledge that."

As Pratt believes that Klan ideology exemplifies and is reflected in the oppressive aspects of the culture, she also believes that the response to that ideology must "cope with the realities of people's lives...must deal with (the question of) multiple identity." The necessity to be "out" is a refusal to let "issues get disconnected depending on who you're talking to." The question is "how you acknowledge differences" without collapsing the contradiction that different people experience their oppression differently.

Pratt also mentions the slogan, current in some anti-Klan literature, "Zionism and the



Klan go hand in hand." That is an example, she says, of "how anti-Klan organizing can *not* promote solidarity." By reducing the complicated history of Zionism to a white, separatist movement, the slogan only succeeds in driving wedges between organizations, dividing people from each other and cutting off dialog.

The other part of this work which has been important to Minnie Bruce Pratt is the belief that you have a lot to learn from a critical

inquiry into your own culture. Confronting the mythology of white southern womanhood was essential to understanding Klan ritual and ideology. This in turn raised questions of what was known and what was hidden, what were truths and what were myths about southern culture.

As an example of truths that remained hidden, Pratt recounted the lynching of a black man in her "own hometown, during my
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