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A Black Lesbian 'Home:' Book & Editor

by Jim Marks, Washington Blade

Barbara Smith, who is expected to be one of the keynote speakers at the 10th Annual Southeastern Gay Conference in April, has edited several books: *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (with Gloria Hull and Patricia Bell Scott), and more recently *Home Girls*.

Raised in Cleveland, Ohio, by a family of black women, Smith is a writer and a teacher, and one of the leading black feminist activists in the country.

But *Some of Us Are Brave* has been described as "an articulate and powerful series of essays that address Black women's experience in America from a clear feminist perspective" (*Off Our Backs*). *Home Girls* was released early last year.

Reading the black feminist anthology *Home Girls*, edited by Barbara Smith (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 378 pp., \$10.95), a white man feels almost an intruder; he has a sense of stumbling upon something not generally exposed to public view. There is, for example, the frank sensuality of Audre Lorde's short story "Tar Beach" (from Lorde's book *Zami*), with its "ripe red finger bananas," and the "deep undulations and tidal motions of your strong body." One has a glimpse of the conflicts between men and women within the black community in works like Linda Powell's "Black Macho and Black Feminism," and of nascent internal literary warring when Jewell Gomez criticizes sister *Home Girls* contributor Ann Shockley for the shallowness of her novel, *Say Jesus and Come to Me*.

Home Girls takes the reader into the workshop where black feminism is being shaped, as in the discussion between editor Smith and activists Gwendolyn Rogers, Jamelah Waheed, and Tania Abdulhad. By the time a white male reader reaches Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker's "Only Justice Can Stop a Curse," he might well feel withered by the heat of the outrage which can find cold comfort in the fact that at least a nuclear war would eradicate the white man and his evil. And one sees vulnerability as well, as when Smith speaks of learning from the failures of the women in her family, "how they were humiliated and crushed because they had made the mistake of being born black and

Barbara Smith:

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female in a white man's country." And, she admits, "I inherited fear and shame from them as well as hope."

In person, Smith gives no sign of either fear or shame. Her manner is comfortable and self-assured, her talk a steady outpouring in a rich voice somewhat deepened, on this occasion, by a cold, her Juno eyes large, luminescent, and observant. She values in black women's language its directness—a virtue she practices—and she says that in bringing to light "the full texture of black lesbian life," her anthology will be "upsetting" to some people.

As Smith tells of her life, a kind of a dialectical tension seems at work, giving it a paradigmatic quality. At 18, she left her native Cleveland, Ohio for Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, where she was a full scholarship student. Her ambition was to be a writer, but her teachers discouraged her, saying that her essays and short stories were not well written. She says that she "realized in retrospect that it was the subject matter, not the technical ability" that her teachers objected to. At privileged, liberal arts Mt. Holyoke, Smith was learning experientially the limitations of acceptance of blacks in white institutions. As Bernice Reagon puts it in *Home Girls*, "you [white people] don't really want black folks, you are just looking for yourself with a little color on it."

If she couldn't be a writer, Smith decided, she could teach. She attended graduate school in Pittsburgh and Storrs, Connecticut but ran into another barrier. It was the time of the black power movement, and the message that movement gave to women, Smith says, was "you're supposed to be a black queen, have babies for the nation, stand *behind* your man." Even though she didn't have the terminology for it in the early 70s, Smith knew she didn't like "the sexual politics of patriarchy," whatever its color.

Smith's dedication to black feminism no doubt springs from the way out it provided from the twin impasses of white and male supremacy. Prior to 1973, while "always interested in the ideas of the feminist movement," Smith had seen it as a white movement. A black feminist conference in 1973 answered the question of "how it applied to me," and a course with Alice Walker provided a sense that one could be a black woman writer.

One other thing, however, was necessary before Smith could feel free to write. Her sexuality was, up until 1974, "a great burden." She thought that to acknowledge that she was gay would mean "a life of terrible isolation," she says. With such an attitude, writing was impossible because "I knew it would only take

two days to get to what was really on my mind...the secret," Smith recalls.

But the support she found in feminism broke down those barriers. "I needed a movement to come out," Smith says. Once she had come out, then "I could say anything I wanted to."

Smith's ideas found structure in the Combahee River Collective of Boston, which she helped found. The collective was named for a Civil War raid in South Carolina planned and led by Harriet Tubman. Among its first efforts was dealing with forced and unwitting sterilizations of black women at Boston City Hospital. Documentation and education were prime tactics in that effort. *Home Girls* has similar aims.

The anthology combines Smith's love of literature with her commitment to "the movement." It brings together poetry, speeches, discussion, short stories, and literary criticism. While there is a section devoted specifically to the lesbian experience—"Who will fight for our lives but us"—other sections also include works with overtly lesbian incidents and themes.

The anthology's history, like its editor's, is one that includes struggle and setbacks. An outgrowth of *Conditions: Five, the Black Women's Issue*, which Smith co-edited, *Home Girls* was first destined for publication by Persephone Press. But that publishing house went bankrupt. For a time, Smith says, it looked as if the book would end up "just being a shopping bag full of manuscripts in my bedroom." An anonymous donation to Kitchen Table, which Smith founded, made publication possible.

The book's political orientation springs from the sense that, as Jewell Gomez writes in her *Home Girls* essay, "A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered," "women of color have long been perceived as the least valuable component in our social and political system—the group with the least economic power, and the smallest political power." But if the basic stance is anti-capitalistic, that doesn't mean, Smith says, that she takes Marx's critique of capitalism as a "political cookbook" with solutions for every problem if one just follows the directions. Instead, she insists, "black feminism is flexible

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