



Are you two sisters? Reflections on a long-overdue subtitle

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***Are you two sisters?* Reflections on a long-overdue subtitle**

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ABSTRACT

In this article, Susan Krieger reflects on how lesbian realities have figured in her published work over the years, although the word “lesbian” did not appear in the books’ titles. Why the invisibility? What lessons are to be learned from exploring the frequent invisibility of lesbian subject matter? Krieger’s discussion throws light on the challenges of writing and publishing from a lesbian perspective.

KEYWORDS

gender;
sexual identity;
lesbian couples;
disability

As I sit awaiting the copyedited version of my new book, *Are You Two Sisters? The Journey of a Lesbian Couple*, I am prompted to think back over my previous published studies and particularly the fact that this book is the first of mine ever to have the word “lesbian” in the title.

When my classic study, *The Mirror Dance*, was published in 1983, the subtitle read “Identity in a Women’s Community.” The word “lesbian” was implied but did not appear. This was, in part, because the women of the Midwestern lesbian community I had studied often referred to their group as “the women’s community” in town, and also, in part, because, it seemed to me not right to use the word “lesbian” in such a prominent way. It would reveal too much, seem too personal, too specific, not generalizing enough to all women. When I sent the manuscript of that book out to publishers and they rejected it because its multivoice style seemed to them “not social science, rather a presentation of raw data,” I could understand their conventional expectations about method. But I also thought that the lesbian content might have had something to do with the rejection of its unconventional form. In the face of that rejection, I persevered until a playwright, who was also an editor at a university press, saw value in the book’s style of telling the community’s story through the sixty voices of its members.

Although the chapters in *The Mirror Dance* covered the women’s intimate relationships with each other, their experiences in bars, in beds, in individual homes and at work, exploring the dilemmas that their lesbian

identity posed for them—the back cover of that book highlighted a quote from a straight woman. It described how she liked participating in a lesbian group that also had heterosexual women in it. There was this bias—on both front and back covers—toward making the lesbianism in the book less prominent than it might be, as if it were background, less important than other things, such as the generalizability to all women.

After *The Mirror Dance*, I wrote *Social Science and the Self: Personal Essays on an Art Form*. Clearly, that book did not have lesbian in the title. But there was something about the words “personal essays” and “art form” that suggested, to me, a vulnerability similar to that I felt with the word “lesbian.” It meant something soft, not ordinarily done, not playing by the strict rules usually expected of science. It is memorable to me that in the last section of that book, where I presented accounts from other academic women whom I interviewed about their experiences with use of the self in their fields, four of these eight women were lesbian—or women whom I knew as lesbian at the time, or who had lesbian experiences for some significant period in their life. This was a secret I kept. It was not mentioned in the book. It might be seen to have no relevance. But it was relevant to me—something I felt as a hidden triumph, bringing lesbian perspectives to the pages, even though they were not presented as such.

Within that book, an important chapter for me was “Beyond ‘Subjectivity’; The Use of the Self in Social Science.” This chapter described my research and writing process for *The Mirror Dance*. In it, I discussed my personal relationships with other lesbians in the community and how it had been hard for me to “separate myself out” from them in order to know what to say in interpreting the reality of their group. But the word “lesbian”—or even a reference to it, and to why this particular identity might cause problems of merger and separation of the self—was not reflected in the chapter’s title. The lesbian specificity of my account was again invisible, at least on the surface, not considered as important or salient as a more general subject.

As I looked at the cover of my next book, *The Family Silver: Essays on Relationships among Women*, the subtitle stood out to me. It could mean simply what it said: “relationships among women” broadly speaking. However, to me, it seemed obvious what that meant: Who would write about relationships among women but a lesbian? That might not be exactly true, but I was seeing my underlying motivation—the bias in what I chose to explore and how I chose to explore it. This bias was hidden in a more conventional title, one that might suggest but, at the same time, camouflage the author’s lesbian sensibility and intent. I had made up the subtitle for this book as I would for all my others, but that did not diminish the degree of hiding or camouflage that occurred. And, to some extent, I took

pride in that camouflage, as if I were illicitly getting away with a secret content under cover of a broader generalization.

The Family Silver contained many chapters exploring lesbian relationships and sensibilities. “Gender Roles among Women” was about my own female, and particularly lesbian, attempts to incorporate both male and female roles in my self-identity. In “Becoming a Lesbian” I told a story of my first serious lesbian love and the way I experienced lesbianism as a process of choice. “Saying No to a Man” was about a time in a feminist methods class when my excluding a disruptive male student became controversial. “Lesbian in Academe” traced my experiences in universities when “not sleeping with” men had serious, if implicit, consequences. And in “Separatism,” I explored women’s—and implicitly lesbians’—needs for separate social spheres where women’s values and ways of doing things could be honored, rather than becoming submerged in a male or heterosexual structure.

Because *The Family Silver* was written more personally than any of my prior books—putting into practice my ideas from *Social Science and the Self* about using first-person experiences in order to probe broader social contexts, I felt unusually vulnerable when it came to speaking publicly about it. I remember a time soon after it was published when I was invited to address a group of students and faculty at a southern California university. I stood up before the large group and, when the question period began, a male student, and then another male student, asked me challenging questions about the book’s perspective. I felt jostled—both by the fact that the first hands up were those of men, and by the questions themselves, though I cannot remember what they were, and by my sense that this book was simply “too personal”—so that any questions invaded my inner space and scared me, upset me, threatened to disclose and hurt me. I decided, after that, to do no more public speaking to promote the new book. It would have to promote itself. I canceled an upcoming speaking engagement at another university and returned to my writing.

Eight years later, when my next book came out, *Things No Longer There: A Memoir of Losing Sight and Finding Vision*, I was about to use it in a class I was teaching on women and disabilities and was proud of the book, with its beautiful new cover. I assigned it to the students mid-quarter. On the day that they were to have read it, they came into the classroom carrying the book with its colorful cover of birds rising over a desert wildlife refuge. I felt so honored and pleased and was looking forward to our discussion. Before we began, a student sitting across from me raised the book in her hand and waved it in the air for all the world to see. “This is a book about lesbianism,” she said.

I gasped. Was it so obvious? I knew I had not put the word “lesbian” in the title. True, the book was also about things left behind more generally—outer landscapes that had changed over time; objects in the external

world that I could no longer see with my eyes but that persisted as vivid inner memories. However, in this book, the things left behind that occupied over two-thirds of the printed pages were stories about lesbian relationships and, particularly, relationships I had had with other women over the years that I was sad to leave behind. There were chapters titled “Lesbophobia,” “Lesbian Invisibility,” “I See Her in My Mind,” and “The Lesbian-Straight Divide: An Intimate Memory.” What prompted the main title, in fact, was my loss of a significant intimate relationship with another woman that I had left behind when I moved from New Mexico to California twenty years before. That was what the phrase *Things No Longer There* initially referred to. But when it came to the subtitle, I had it reflect primarily on the several chapters I had written later about losing my eyesight that were also on the book’s theme. Both the subtitle and the cover image suggested my loss of vision. The cover photo of birds rising above the desert pond was set into a larger background image that blurred the details in order to suggest my increasing blindness.

I remember when a representative from the radio program “To the Best of Our Knowledge” called me to do an interview based on the book. “The host wants to talk with you about the chapters on your vision loss—the middle section,” she said. That, I took, was a clue to me, a directive. I knew what they were talking about. We were going to discuss my eyesight on the air, a health issue. I shouldn’t deviate from it. “Sure,” I said with a smile, grasping the central idea. I could write about lesbian relationships, but the subject for the broader public—even the educated public of NPR—was my health issue, my less controversial issue, my blindness.

“Of course,” I thought. That’s what others want to know.” It’s less personal, less challenging maybe, more on the straight and narrow, the up and up. It’s popular. It was certainly easier for me to talk about—more “a matter of fact,” a firsthand experience that made me feel squeaky clean, that somehow made speaking in public about my experiences more acceptable and valuable, more viewed as if “teaching the world” something.

It all made sense. So for the next book, I decided to focus on my blindness. I wrote *Traveling Blind: Adventures in Vision with a Guide Dog by My Side*. The cover showed me with a golden dog leading me across a grassy field. Yet that book was as much, if not more, about my traveling blind with an intimate lesbian partner by my side. “This book is a romance, a travel adventure, an emotional quest, and a book about coming to terms with lack of sight,” I suggested in the Introduction, with the word “romance” intended to refer to my relationship with my intimate partner Hannah.

Although *Traveling Blind* was often introspective, exploring the challenges that my loss of vision posed for me—and the gifts as well—this was interspersed with stories of navigating both with the dog and with

Hannah as we traveled country roads, city streets, and moved through the spaces in our home. Throughout the book, the role of Hannah in my life—and in my learning how to deal with my blindness and my new interdependencies—was often subtly expressed. For example:

Traveling Blind opens with a story about a time when Hannah drove us through the New Mexico desert when I could no longer drive, because she knew how much I wanted to enjoy this part of the country. ...We turned east at Route 9, listening to the cowboy music on the car stereo—stories of a woman's love for men, which felt oddly out of place in our car. But the female singer was soulful, the music rich, and I kept waiting for the subject to shift to love of cowgirls.

I was traveling now with Hannah in the winter desert and just being together was a great light in my darkness.

Strange that I'd seek comfort and haven near a mountain so far away when the real comfort was always closer to me—in my inner ability to find pleasure in my travels, and in my relationship with Hannah—in her arms, her willingness to make me happy. Dramatic clouds had signaled my coming to Big Hatchet Mountain today. Far less dramatic was the quiet affection we shared, less easy to see than a mountain, but no less there.

[In the spa pool that night,] Hannah turned off the lights overhead and lit the space with candles. In this warm, enveloping, naturally fuzzy world, my eyesight felt at home. I did not have to focus on anything but Hannah's naked body reflecting the candlelight. I focused on the water lit from below, on getting in and out of the pool, on the marvel of my being here. Invigorated, I swam over to Hannah and dipped under her, arose holding her, tracing the outline of her body with my fingers, feeling the minerals softening her skin. ... I floated with Hannah. She held me as I lay on my back in the water. We glided together, then apart, then back together, delighting in each other, caressing, touching, moving breast to breast.

Initially, I titled this book simply *Traveling Blind*. But after sending the manuscript out and receiving quite a few rejections, when a university press with a series on "New Directions in the Human-Animal Bond" showed interest in publishing it, I jumped at the chance. I added the subtitle in the end to indicate the book's appropriateness for the series. Features of the human-dog interaction were highlighted in the Introduction and elaborated more in some of the chapters. Still, the feeling of the book is, I think, definitely lesbian, though it requires turning the pages to reveal that secret.

After *Traveling Blind*, I wanted to write more about my autoethnographic approach of speaking personally about my experiences in order to arrive at broader insights. I wished to extend some of the ideas I had originally presented in *Social Science and the Self*. Over the years, my studies had become increasingly intimate, and I sought to examine further the issues that raised. Initially, I titled my new book “The Art of the Intimate Narrative: Unconventional Academic Writing.” The chapters were written to illustrate my evolving intimate style and organized in sections: “A Personal Style,” “Giving Voice to Memory,” and “The Art of Sight.” Within each section, the narratives dealt very personally with the themes of gender, identity, and disability that I had been exploring in my prior studies. A final section of the book titled “Sharing the Road” contained a series of stories about my, by now, ten-year relationship with my guide dog Teela, which had seemed to me to present a rare opportunity to apply my intimate narrative approach.

When the time came to submit the manuscript for publication, I contacted the publisher that had taken *Traveling Blind*, suggesting that this book had significant human-animal bond content, even more so than *Traveling Blind*. The director thought the Press could accept the book if the relationship with the guide dog was brought out as the focus, and noted that, in the end, it had to be indicated in the title. I moved the “Sharing the Road” section of stories about my relationship with Teela to the beginning of the book, moved the more methodological discussions to the last section, wrote new titles for some of the chapters to focus more on their content than their style, added a closing dog chapter, retitled the volume, and I soon had a book called *Come, Let Me Guide You: A Life Shared with a Guide Dog*.

Needless to say, *Come, Let Me Guide You*, like *Traveling Blind*, had hidden contents. In addition to the methodological discussions and themes, throughout the book, not only was my guide dog Teela in the role of guiding me, but my intimate human partner Hannah was again often guiding us both. Though her presence was subtle and understated, she was always there, pointing out obstacles in our path, giving me suggestions, figuring out how to proceed, offering her love. One of the most powerful chapters in the book was about my eighteen-year relationship with my first lesbian therapist, an older generation dyke whose lesbianism clearly made a difference to me, emphasizing a sense of closeness between us. Throughout the book, my lesbian sensitivities were expressed—my longings for other women, my sense of being found in relation to them, my essential desires for intimacy. In the guiding methodological chapter included in the book, “The Art of the Intimate Narrative,” I reflected on the challenges of representing lesbianism I felt in my writing:

As in my prior works, I was again pushing a recognition of something hard to see—an invisible reality. In *Things No Longer There* and *The*

Family Silver, lesbianism was the central invisible reality that I had focused upon, seeking to describe it in an underlying way for what I felt it was—a difference, something soft and at my center of great import in my life, but for which I often did not have the words to describe it well, to acknowledge it, to “see” it. Like blindness, lesbianism felt so connected to my vulnerable inner sense of self and comfort that I felt it was difficult to reveal, for fear of adverse consequences.

When I look at *Come, Let Me Guide You* in recent years, I marvel at the cover, showing me and my guide dog Teela, now white in the face because of her age, but smiling her broad Golden Retriever smile—and I am smiling too. I like that cover. I liked that book. But I sorely wish it was still titled “The Art of the Intimate Narrative.” I wonder now whether I might have done better to hold out and try for getting the book published as what it really was. But I was concerned about getting rejected, since that had long been a painful history for me, and, by then, I was used to taking pride in having my true content come out under cover.

For my next book, I decided to focus on lesbianism. As I began writing, I thought of my relationship with Hannah, whom I had been with for over thirty years. In my prior ethnographies, I had explored other intimate relationships. Hannah was often present but in the background. Now it was time to depict us both and what we had shared. I was especially interested in the “self-other” challenges that a lesbian couple relationship posed, that I had dealt with much earlier in *The Mirror Dance*—the dilemmas of dealing with differences between us at the same time as we shared many similarities because we were women, and the dilemmas of relating to the outside world where our lesbian identity was often hidden.

In *Are You Two Sisters?* I sought to probe our togetherness. The book describes how I first met Hannah in 1980 when I returned to California to take a postdoctoral fellowship at a university. It follows us over time as we get acquainted, move in together after three years of living apart, and as we share adventures in the larger world. It takes the reader along with us as we visit places and lovers of our past, travel in the New Mexico desert and along the California coast, as we nurture a home full of dogs and cats, come to terms with differences in our personalities and habits, and eventually get married, even though we did not view that institution in the most positive light.

Initially, I called this new ethnography my “Lesbianism Book.” That is the label I gave it on the folder in my computer to which I increasingly added new chapters. Often as I wrote, I became anxious that some university technician providing remote support to my computer would see it in my list of files. What would he think of me? Would he consider me illegitimate? What

kind of a topic was that for an academic? I looked forward to the time when that label might change, but I did not know what the new title might be.

In the end, the title *Are You Two Sisters?* came from one of the chapters. That chapter describes an experience Hannah and I had on one of our trips in the Southwest. I had just stepped out of a desert bar in a remote area near the border of New Mexico, Arizona, and Mexico when a man following me out, called after me, in a challenging tone, “Are you two sisters?” He had seen me with Hannah inside the bar, where she was paying our lunch bill. I did not answer the man but proceeded to walk across the dusty parking lot toward our car, following my guide dog Fresco (who had succeeded Teela). The man called after me again, “Are you two sisters?” I did not answer him and quickly got in the car. Later, when Hannah came out and we drove off, I told her about his question.

“What did you say?” she asked.

“I didn’t answer him.”

I was embarrassed because of my lack of nerve. Surely it would have been okay to acknowledge that I was a lesbian in 2017, but I wasn’t taking chances. To admit being a lesbian in this circumstance felt like I would be making myself too vulnerable. Still, the man’s question stayed with me and proved to be food for thought. Who were we? Why did he ask? Why was it so hard for me to answer him?

When three years later, I was ready to submit my completed book manuscript to publishers, I needed a title. I thought of that provocative chapter title and decided to use it for the book as well. With the question, “Are you two sisters?” I intended to convey both the visibility and invisibility of lesbian identity. The query was open-ended, as if inviting the reader to flip back the cover of the book and find out. Were these two women a lesbian couple or not, and what difference did that make? What was their reality like?

In choosing a subtitle, I faced more of a challenge. An editor had once told me that a subtitle needs to say what the book is actually about. “You can have a poetic description for the main title,” he said, “but the subtitle has to be more explicit so readers and book sellers will know what to do with it.” I knew I should follow that advice, but I was worried about how to represent the specifics. I considered “Reflections on Self and Other,” “Private Moments, Public Lives,” clearly generalizing, avoiding the word “lesbian,” hoping that my main title would convey my meaning.

I finally decided on “The Journey of a Lesbian Couple,” because I felt it summarized the main narrative flow of the book and because I was determined not to shy away from the word “lesbian” once more.

I sent out my letter of inquiry to publishers, along with a sample chapter and the Introduction announcing *Are You Two Sisters? The Journey of a*

Lesbian Couple. The university presses I reached out to had relevant lists in LGBTQ and Disability Studies. Still I met with rejection. “Why?” I wondered. The answer was the same in most of the responses—that the book was “personal” and that the particular publisher did not publish this type of thing. I looked at their lists and could see that sometimes they did publish personal accounts. But when it came to “my” personal, this was not what was needed.

After too many rejections, I decided to remove the lesbian subtitle. I began sending my inquiries out with only the main title, *Are You Two Sisters?*, and with the accompanying explanation: “This is a book about female intimacy in contemporary American society.” I was again generalizing about my subject, seeking to hide it.

When a publisher soon expressed interest in this book without a subtitle, I was surprised that my autoethnographic approach was not immediately the reason for a rejection. “It must be the line ‘female intimacy in contemporary American society’ that did it,” I thought. This press had, many years before, published *The Mirror Dance*, and that was a reason for their interest.

I sent them the entire manuscript, waited for readers’ reports, and pondered my fate. Was it really going to happen? Was someone going to publish my latest lesbian book, whose content was, by then, entirely clear—even if the word was not in the title? The Press was enthusiastic, had published other autoethnographic accounts, liked my writing, and had received positive readers’ reports. But I was still worried. Did the stories in the book hold together well enough? Were readers and potential critics likely to view the book as not only a series of stories, but a unified whole? Was I ready yet to put the word “lesbian” in my new book title?

In my final proposal for the Press faculty board, I recommended adding a subtitle and suggested that “The Journey of a Lesbian Couple” might help give future readers a more unified sense of the way the stories fit together as a whole:

I had thought previously that *Are You Two Sisters?* should have a subtitle. I now think that “The Journey of a Lesbian Couple” would be appropriate and would speak to readers’ concerns...providing a unifying sense for the entire book.

The Press accepted the subtitle. The book was approved with much appreciation. I was glad I had added the word “lesbian,” though still worried about possible consequences. Was the word just too limiting? Would it tarnish the book somehow? Was it now passé? But I knew it was important that the word was there. I could see that the main title suggested an ambiguity also present in the titles of my previous books dealing with lesbian realities. It suggested an invisibility, a presence and

yet an absence, a sense of “Now you see us. Now you don’t.” But peeking out from beneath that questioning title was the word lesbian. It revealed a bit more than I wanted it too, leaving me somewhat uncomfortable, but perhaps that was as it should be.

Are You Two Sisters? provides some answers to its central question and explores reasons for lesbian invisibility, but it leaves it to the reader ultimately to decide—what it is to be a lesbian, what distinguishes that kind of life, that kind of personal identity or choice. What are the dilemmas of self and other that uniquely occur within a female couple and in lesbian relationships more generally, and how are they resolved—what is their story?

In the following excerpt from *Are You Two Sisters?*, I try to give a feeling for that sense of having a hidden reality that I often felt was a constant presence for Hannah and me as we traveled. It is from a chapter titled “Border Patrol”:

Hannah and I had grown to prize the late afternoon light out here at Big Hatchet Mountain, I thought. It turned everything gold. It hit the grasses and shrubs, hit our faces, hit my golden dog, made us feel special to be here—at a remove, not bothered, not in our usual spots, our usual haunts, not in the city, not surrounded by others, by white trucks or cattle ranchers or helicopters. Now we were here only with each other. I put my arm around Hannah’s shoulder. She came close, slipping her arm around my waist as we stood looking out. A world was far below and at a distance in the outstretched desert. Close by, I felt the quiet surrounding us, saw the land bathed in gold, and treasured my memories of other times—some more peaceful than others, perhaps. But really all of them were peaceful. The only rough parts that mattered were those that might disrupt the life between us. And we were here now out at Big Hatchet—out in the desert where few people went, or cared to go, other than the ranchers, the hunters, the Border Patrol, the occasional hikers and migrants. But this space wasn’t theirs. It was ours. Wherever we went, we were in our own space together. The outside world, it was just that—outside. It intruded sometimes, unsettling us. But we didn’t let it destroy us even when it entered in sometimes over our boundaries.

“Focus on us,” I remembered Hannah had said that time I bemoaned the presence of the white Border Patrol van in “our spot” in the clearing near the cattle. “Focus on us. We’re here. We’re together.”

I thought about how she had so often helped me keep the world out, helped me keep disturbing thoughts at bay, helped me feel more settled and reassured within myself, took me places even if they were foreign to her, places where I could feel at a remove. She was magical

to me, somehow unexpected. She was practical yet happy to go on new adventures with me. I took her hand as the three of us walked down the rocky path on the side of the mountain, then along the back road toward our car.

I hope my discussion of the titles of my books, and of the long-overdue subtitle of the latest, suggests I am talking about more than labeling a new book—but about the very words we use to describe us. It doesn't have to be "lesbian." It could be something else. But it's the meaning, the distinctness, the sense of a forbidden or at least hidden reality that the word evokes that is most important—and seeing that reality despite obfuscation.

I have, for much of my life, sought after a lesbian dream—a dream of a female intimacy, nurturance, and self-acceptance that is elusive, but no less there. I hope readers will find some sense of that dream in the pages of *Are You Two Sisters?* and in those other accounts of lesbian realities to be found "under cover" in my prior books.

Notes on contributor

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Note

I am indebted to many feminist authors and scholars who have documented women's intimate realities and blazed the way in lesbian studies. I refer to their works extensively in my forthcoming book *Are You Two Sisters? The Journey of a Lesbian Couple* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2022). In addition to *Are You Two Sisters?* the prior works of my own that I have cited in this article are: *The Mirror Dance: Identity in a Women's Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); *Social Science and the Self: Personal Essays on an Art Form* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991); *The Family Silver: Essays on Relationships among Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); *Things No Longer There: A Memoir of Losing Sight and Finding Vision* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005); *Traveling Blind: Adventures in Vision with a Guide Dog by My Side* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2010); and *Come, Let Me Guide You: A Life Shared with a Guide Dog* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2015).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.