

Introduction

Several years ago, as I stepped out of a bar in a small desert town in New Mexico, a man followed me out and called after me, “Are you two sisters?” He had seen me with my partner Hannah inside the bar where she was now settling our lunch bill. As I walked with my guide dog toward our car across a dusty parking lot, the man tagged after me and called again in a challenging tone, “Are you two sisters?” I felt unnerved and did not respond, but his question stayed with me. Why did he ask? Why did he need to know? And why was it so hard for me to answer him?

When Hannah came out and we drove off, I told her what the man had said. “What did you tell him?” she asked.

“I didn’t say.”

She assured me that was all right. But I was uncertain. I knew I had felt a need to protect myself in this isolated town surrounded only by dry desert fields and mountains. But I also felt, “I should have had the nerve to speak.”

I had, by then, been working on this book for some time, exploring the intimacies of a lesbian couple. The man’s question called my attention to how lesbians were viewed in the outside

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world—that just as Hannah and I were always relating to each other, we were also constantly navigating our boundaries with others around us, needing to protect ourselves and often not knowing quite how to do it.

I subsequently decided to title this book *Are You Two Sisters?* because that is a question lesbians are often asked when others seek to know us, and because it suggests our own intimate self-questioning: Who are we? How am I different from others, and how am I the same? It also suggests feelings of vulnerability about our boundaries—the sense that one can easily be assaulted simply walking out the door.

Are You Two Sisters? traces the life of a lesbian couple over time, beginning in the 1980s with a meeting on a university campus, and through the several decades that follow as the two women become increasingly intimate with each other and share adventures in the larger world. Throughout, I raise the question: What difference does it make that the two women are lesbian? What makes them similar to others? What makes them different? What can be learned from following in the steps of these two women and considering their self-other dilemmas? Especially, I ask, why does lesbianism remain so often invisible?

I first examined issues of lesbian identity in my 1980s study, *The Mirror Dance: Identity in a Women's Community*. In that ethnography, I focused on a sixty-member social group in which individuals sought a sense of themselves apart from the straight world. In *Are You Two Sisters?* I explore similar dilemmas of self and other, but this time, I focus on a lesbian couple. Like *The Mirror Dance*, this book is innovative in its narrative style. It draws from interior reflections to probe the often hidden world of a lesbian intimacy, as well as to suggest broader themes concerning self and society.

In a previous work, *Social Science and the Self*, I argued for the value of an autoethnographic method of investigating social realities, one that recognizes the first-person experiences of the re-

searcher as a legitimate source of broader insights. In my subsequent studies, I applied this approach to explore experiences of gender, identity, and disability. *Are You Two Sisters?* extends my method in new ways. This book is intended both for the general reader and as a contribution to the academic fields of gender, sexuality, and disability studies. A bibliography placing the current work in the context of literature in these fields appears at the end, along with an Afterword, “On Writing *Are You Two Sisters?*,” that discusses the book’s method and underlying themes.

While issues of invisibility and identity have run through all my previous work, *Are You Two Sisters?* is the most intimate of my books. It takes the reader along not only on my singular adventures but into the heart of a relationship I have had with another woman for the past forty years. Written in a candid personal style, it describes how I first met Hannah in 1980 when I stopped by her office, ostensibly to ask her advice on my new lesbian community study, but really to get to know her. It follows us as we move in together after three years of living apart and leads 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, 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.

In these pages, I tell the story of our journey in a manner both introspective and novelistic, often describing situations between Hannah and myself through dialog and evocative suggestion of scenes. I wish to enable the reader to feel “right there” with us in our life together, to experience things as we did, to see us and, at the same time, to reflect on the journey along with me.

“Hannah” in these tales is a stand-in for the real-life woman with whom I have shared my life intimately for the past forty years. I use a pseudonym for her, as in my prior work, because my writing is a version of experience unavoidably from my point of view.

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When others appear in my accounts, they are figures of my imagination, no matter how accurately I seek to represent them. Were Hannah to tell our story, I am sure there would be much similarity, but it would be her version and her perspective would be articulated more fully.

I use the term “lesbian” in these narratives to refer to relationships of intimacy between women, often including shared sexuality. I am aware that others may use different terms, but this word resonates the most deeply for me, perhaps because it was in common use when I came of age seeking close, loving relationships with other women. I hope that readers may identify with some of the experiences I describe no matter the name assigned, and that this new book, like *The Mirror Dance*, may have a mirroring function.

When I began this ethnography, I did not know where my inquiries would lead. I knew only that I wished to explore the pivotal relationship in my life as I had once explored the many intimacies of a lesbian community. I wanted to do it justice, and I wanted Hannah to be pleased. As the chapters unfolded, I thought intently about some of the themes that I had first become aware of in writing *The Mirror Dance*: What did it mean to be a lesbian in a nonlesbian world and to be similar to each other as women yet very different? How can I be with another woman and not lose my sense of self to who she is? The deep feelings and idealistic expectations raised by lesbian relationships struck me—particularly the desires for mutual nurturance and acceptance. I noticed patterns of separateness and boundaries; of vulnerability or openness, of one to the other; of a life without a predetermined course, and without the usual heterosexual roles and protections. And very importantly—always lurking in the background—was the search for security and the need to protect one’s lesbian intimacies from the outside world.

While I was working on this study, during 2015–2020, the vision loss I had been experiencing for many years intensified. The

words swam on the computer screen before me to such an extent that, increasingly, I had to rely on my computer's voice to speak my words aloud to me. I listened to my prose as I wrote it, playing back my paragraphs repeatedly, sitting away from the computer monitor, eyes cast down, feeling the flow, feeling and thinking, over and over again—what am I expressing? How will it affect the reader? Am I capturing the emotional sense that is right for this remembrance, this incident—for when we first shared a bed, or took that trip to the desert, or drove across the golden California hills toward the beaches? Because I was listening as I wrote, I felt that, more than ever before, I was paying attention to the lyrical feel of my narratives and to using my inner voice as a way to convey outer experience as well.

In a way, *Are You Two Sisters?* may be for the reader, as it was for me, a challenge in the art of listening. Each chapter is a tale told from the inside out about a couple relationship. Each is a story about part of our journey, designed to stand alone as well as to fit with the rest. Each describes an experience Hannah and I shared and reflects back on our life together up to that time. The book is organized in thematic sections, in which the different stories fall: “Formalities of Attachment,” “Our Formative Years,” “The Sweep of Time,” and “Who We Are.” This organization seemed to me most fitting to the nature of the individual reflections, each written in pursuit of insights into a lesbian relationship and its self-other dilemmas.

Rather than a book that begins with the time I first met Hannah and moves forward in a strict chronological fashion, in *Are You Two Sisters?* many small journeys cumulatively fill out the shape of the whole. Some chapters are more deliberately retrospective than others, but all have that somewhat wistful quality of intermingling the present with the past, as occurs in real life. Some are literally travels along back roads in which Hannah and I face new challenges and reflect on our past life together. Others are journeys in a more figurative sense—journeys in getting to

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know each other, or in moving in together, or in seeing a couples therapist over time and learning new ways to relate to each other.

One of the themes that has struck me most as we travel is that Hannah and I lead a life that is often “under the radar,” not easily seen by others. We blend in with a background of heterosexuality so that it is often hard to tell that we are lesbians. We are protective of our privacy with each other and move carefully in an outside world that may not be friendly to women who do not choose intimacies with men. Yet we take for granted the naturalness of our bond, the subtle pleasures that tie us together. I invite the reader to join us as the book opens with a story of our taking a major step not available when we started out, that of getting married. We are in San Francisco City Hall saying our vows, reflecting back on what has come before and ahead to what may yet unfold. That afternoon, for our “honeymoon,” we take a trip down the coast with our dogs, again remembering times past when we traveled the same coast—visiting the beaches, getting acquainted, dealing with the challenges of our relationship, braving new roads and adventures.

Here, then, is *Are You Two Sisters?*—because issues of lesbian intimacy have long fascinated me and I wished to probe them further, and in answer to a man’s question outside a desert bar. I hope the reader will enjoy my tales and share the excitement I have long felt in braving life with Hannah. I remain grateful to her real-life counterpart who, many years ago, opened her office door when a stranger knocked on it one fall afternoon, inquiring about her willingness to talk about a nascent lesbian community study. With this new book, I thank her for that conversation and for enriching my life ever since.