



Honey Lee Cottrell.
Image courtesy of the Division
of Rare and Manuscript Collections,
Cornell University Library.

Putting Aesthetics to Hope

Tracking Photography's Role in Feminist Communities

In 2016, a group of women sent scouts down to the border between Venezuela and Guyana to seek out land for their feminist utopia. At first, they called their planned community Herland, after the female separatist novel set vaguely in South America by feminist yet xenophobic writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman. They opened their community to trans individuals, and vigorously planned on Facebook and Tumblr pages that remained active until soon after the 2016 election—Trump's ascent making escape all the more attractive. On a Facebook page with over 5,000 members, potential participants discussed capitalism, money, menstruation, and other logistics. Kate White, one of the founders, gave interviews. "We are putting feminism into actual practice," she told *Vice*.¹

The jungle utopia does not yet and may never exist, but the energy and dialogue around it was lively, even urgent. Such energy contrasts the reality facing separatist communities that already exist in North America, such as those founded in the 1970s and 1980s on "womyn's land" (often-rural land trusts inhabited by groups of lesbian women). For instance, Huntington Open Women's Land, or HOWL, a community in rural Vermont, has seen membership steadily decline in recent years, especially among younger women—most residents remain over 50. Earlier this year, one HOWL member told the *New York Times*, "We need to take more photographs. For younger people, it's all about Instagram, Facebook."²

Funnily, photography played an expressly different role for womyn's lands when they first began. Joan E. Biren, or JEB, said she considered the compellingly intimate photos she took of her community from the 1970s on as a kind of propaganda. She intended for the images to suggest possibilities—groups of lesbian mothers with babies; couples working the land together, harmoniously. "I believed they could help build a movement for our liberation," JEB, now 75, said in April.³

Photographs by JEB and others appear in Carmen Winant's newly-released, lyrically-titled artist book, *Notes on Fundamental Joy; seeking the elimination of oppression through the social and political transformation of the patriarchy that otherwise threatens to bury us*. As with Winant's previous projects, including her 2018 book *My Birth* (filled with found images of women giving birth), all of the images in *Notes on Fundamental Joy* are made by others but assembled and arranged by Winant. They appear on thin, semi-translucent paper, each revealing a hint of the page to come. An essay by Winant runs along the bottom of each page, just one line of text anchoring an ongoing stream of enthralling photographs.

Her words, searching, inquisitive yet also minimal, tell us that she *wants* something from these images, which she began collecting during her first of two pregnancies and continued to assemble as she finished *My Birth*.⁴ She writes that she "fell into these pictures" because she found them "enormously seductive," and felt that they helped her understand what she "was seeking out: a world where the rules and expectations of patriarchy did not exist, where violence (especially sexual violence) was eradicated and where only photography could serve to describe both."⁵ The book is largely about photography, and the role it plays in world building, specifically for a group of queer women working and living in the midst of feminism's second wave.

Winant admits that she has never identified as queer, and that the communities depicted in these images likely would have been closed to her; she

1. Gabby Bess, "No Man's Land: How to Build a Feminist Utopia," *Vice*, Oct. 13, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xye9k3/no-mans-land-how-to-build-a-feminist-utopia.

cannot claim these women's histories as her own. She can, however, question her attraction to the photographs, and hypothesizes that it's a vision of optimism that she is ultimately seeking a vision of optimism: "What does [optimism] actually *look* like?" she asks. "Is there an aesthetic to hope, expectancy?"⁶ In this way, the book is more a gesture toward a feeling than a documentation of a moment in history. It's a kind of visual gateway drug that entices viewers with possibilities of utopia, hope, and community—possibilities that have a special resonance in a moment when patriarchy seems to be both shattering in dramatic ways and reasserting its dominance. But it does not offer any thesis or pointers for how to adopt and adapt what we see to make it work for us now.

Throughout the book, women face each other much more often than they face the camera—they sit in large circles, or appear lost in conversation. When they do face a camera, it's often because there's another photographer outside the frame, photographing women being photographed. In a handful of images, there is a mirror, and both photographer and subject look into it. Because many of her source images came from the Feminist Photography Ovulars, workshops where lesbian feminist photographers taught the medium to their peers, Winant includes pages of images of women with cameras, sometime nude but for the cameras around their necks, sometimes completely lost in their work, sometimes posing for each other, or sometimes sitting in front of walls of photographic prints. The pressure and gloss of professionalism are absent, but all the focus and seriousness is there. Rarely do two images appear on the same page—Winant has given each one space, as if respecting its autonomy even while enveloping it into her own project. If the images in Winant's book do portray seemingly ideal and truly collaborative interactions, they also evidence the limitations of the North American womyn's land communities, which consisted primarily of white, cis-gendered women, their liberation

from their own prejudices and backgrounds clearly still incomplete. (Only one woman of color, appears in the book, shown adjusting her camera above text by Winant that asks, "[C]an feminism actually exist within capitalism? Can you in fact imagine occupying a non-patriarchal world?")

The names of photographers do not appear next to or underneath their images. Instead, Winant credits the authors of the photographs—or the workshop or archive they came from, since some remain unattributed—in a small font on a single page in the book's center. Neither the captions nor the pages have numbers, and the captions are not chronological, so there is no easy way to match photographer with image. This makes the images read even more like they belong to Winant's stream-of-consciousness, all of them coming together with a rhythm and an energy that pull us into her processing of what it means to escape from patriarchy—and as an artist's project, this is worthy and effective. But, much of this work warrants more historical recognition than it has received in its own right, and its beauty in many ways stems directly from the intentions and ideologies of its makers, which here feel subsumed by Winant's own grappling.

The Ovulars began in 1979 in Oregon at Rootworks, the womyn's I and founded in 1978 by Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove. The couple, both women, had changed their surnames after moving to their previous intentional community called Mountain Grove. Ruth, who divorced her husband in the mid-1960s, began photographing the women's movement and separatist communities in earnest in 1974. Five years later, she began the workshops because she wanted more dialogue around her own work, and to help bring others into the work she was already doing: portraying their lived experiences from their own perspectives. She chose "ovular" as the title because it contrasted the word "seminar," which has etymological roots in the word semen and thus the spreading of that kind of seed. In the words of writer and artist Tee

2. Rina Raphael, "Why Doesn't Anyone Want to Live in this Beautiful Place?," *The New York Times*, Aug. 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/24/style/womyns-land-movement-lesbian-communities.html>.

3. Kerry Manders, "Photos of Lesbian Lives Meant to Inspire a Movement," *The New York Times*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/08/lens/lesbian-lives-movement-jeb.html>.



movement), I often begin with a set of questions: can feminism actually exist within



Above: Carmen Winant, *Notes on Fundamental Joy*; seeking the elimination of oppression through the social and political transformation of the patriarchy that otherwise threatens to bury us. Image courtesy of the artist and Printed Matter, Inc.

Below: Honey Lee Cottrell. Image courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Corinne—who co-taught the workshops and published many resulting images in the magazine she contributed to and helped shape, *The Blatant Image*—described the workshops as “structured for support and against competition,” where “questions could be freely asked.”⁷ In her own images, Ruth Mountaingrove tended toward non-hierarchical compositions, avoiding single focal points in favor of capturing multiple interactions at once. In one image, which appears early on in Winant’s book, women sit in a circle, their bodies creating the oval form that dominates the composition. JEB, who also participated in the *Ovulars*, extended her own opposition to hierarchy to her language, refusing to use words like “capture” and “shoot,” or even to refer to “subjects.”⁸ She saw herself as being in conversation and collaboration with those in her photos. Rarely in JEB’s images is one figure the star. In a manner, Winant’s fluid, captionless arrangement of images mimics JEB’s democratic ethos—when everything is a collaboration, and

no one is protagonist, it can be hard to know just how much of a stink to make about authorship.

Writer Ariel Goldberg, who, unlike Winant, identifies as a lesbian and as trans, composed the short essay that appears in the book’s center just before the image credits. Goldberg pushes this question of credit and authorship. “Where are these people in these pictures now?” (Some are dead, some still active, and others not found or unidentified by Goldberg or Winant.) They continue, “How do they feel about these images being circulated in an artists’ book [...]? Who will gain notoriety and benefit from these images re-entering the world in a new context, outside the subcultures that created them?” This last question isn’t one Goldberg can answer definitively, not yet, though they do wonder at what this history of separatism—often too white, and inflexible with its definition of “woman”—offers now.

A series of self-portraits of Honey Lee Cottrell concludes the book. Cottrell,



Honey Lee Cottrell.
Image courtesy of the Division
of Rare and Manuscript Collections,
Cornell University Library.

a photographer and filmmaker who attended the Ovulars, is at the barber-shop, photographing herself in the shop's wide mirror while an Asian-American man cuts her already-short hair. She continues to photograph herself as he finishes the job and loses interest, moving on to read the paper in the background of the frame. She looks at the camera confidently, half-smiling, surrounded by big mirrors and many liquid-filled bottles that share space with her almost equally. At this point, it has been years since the Ovulars met, and Cottrell is older, no longer surrounded only by women, but still documenting and contextualizing her butchness. In the text beneath, Winant, in closing, continues to wonder whether her engagement with these images might be hurtful to "those who participated, to those who inherited from this carving out of lesbian self."⁹

If the book were more didactic, this would be an especially serious concern. But as it is, *Notes on Fundamental Joy* functions more as an invitation to engage alongside the artist in a wide-open process that has (as of yet) no clear end. No one-to-one process would bring the promise suggested in these images—which were always images, and thus just glimpses, even if truthful ones—into our present. We also know from experience that many, even those who would prefer a world without cis men, would not have been able to thrive or feel included in the versions of separatism that existed in the past, and that still persist in some form on womyn's land now. What JEB said in 2004 still holds: "Once you decide that the world is messed up, then you have to question everything, everything" and "you have to figure out what is a revolutionary way to live." She added, "figuring that out is just about a full-time job."¹⁰ The job still needs doing or redoing, and the images in *Notes on Fundamental Joy* are an inspiration but not a guide.

Catherine Wagley writes about art and visual culture in Los Angeles.

4. Charlotte Jansen, "Why Photography Was So Important to These Lesbian Communities," *Artsy*, Aug. 7, 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-photography-radical-lesbian-communes>.

5. Carmen Winant, *Notes on Fundamental Joy; seeking the elimination of oppression through the social and political transformation of the patriarchy that otherwise threatens to bury us* (New York: Printed Matter, 2019).

6. *Ibid.*

7. Tee A. Corrine, "The Blatant Image: Making a Magazine," *Women In Photography: Expanding Connections* conference, June 16–18, 1989, Bryn Mawr College.

8. Manders, "Photos of Lesbian Lives."

9. Winant, *Notes on Fundamental Joy*.

10. Joan E. Biren, Interviewed by Kelly Anderson, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, February 27–28, 2004.