



Pat Parker

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If I could take all my parts with me when I go somewhere, and not have to say to one of them, “No, you stay home tonight, you won’t be welcome,” because I’m going to an all-white party where I can be gay, but not Black. Or I’m going to a Black poetry reading, and half the poets are antihomosexual, or thousands of situations where something of what I am cannot come with me. The day all the different parts of me can come along, we would have what I would call a revolution.

— Movement in Black

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Quick Facts

- * 1944-1989
- * African-American lesbian-radical poet and activist
- * One of her most popular works is *Movement in Black*

Biography

Southern born and educated, Pat Parker began her life in Houston, Texas, on January 20, 1944, as the youngest of four daughters in a Black working class family. Urged by her father to take “the freedom train of education,” Parker later emigrated to Oakland, California, in the early 1970s to pursue work, writing and opportunities for activism. Working from 1978 to 1987 as medical coordinator at the Oakland Feminist Women’s Health Center, which grew from one clinic to six sites during her tenure, Parker also participated in political activism ranging from early involvement with the Black Panther Party and Black Women’s Revolutionary Council to formation of the Women’s Press Collective to wide-ranging activism in gay and lesbian organizations and positions of national leadership regarding women’s health issues, especially concerning domestic and sexual violence.

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From all these stages of her life, Parker developed a narrative poetry, often taking on a call and response form recognizable in black and working class oral traditions, and often speaking of generations of women and men engaged in human rights battles. Parker's poetry generally escapes didacticism because of her deft use of humor, insistence on frank language, presentations of events and images long silent, and sharp analysis of injustices. The goal, Parker said in an interview with Kate Rushin, is to "try to put the poetry in the language that we speak, to use that language, take those simple works and make out of them something that is moving, that is powerful, that is there."

Parker gave her first public reading of her poetry in 1963 while married to playwright Ed Bullins. The challenge of "competing in a male poetry scene" as the wife of a writer, Parker notes, helped develop not only her voice but also her willingness to write about contemporary issues -- about civil rights and Vietnam as well as an emerging African-American lesbian feminist perspective on love and lust. Reading before women's groups beginning in 1968 brought Parker notice and satisfaction, especially as she joined Judy Grahn, a white working class Bay Area poet, to read lesbian poetry in public, arranging readings not only at women's bookstores, but also intermixing poetry with musical performances at local women's bars, coffeehouses and festivals.

"It was like pioneering," Parker said to Rushin. "We'd go into these places and stand up to read poems. We were talking to women about women, and, at the same time, letting women know that the experiences they were having we shared by other people . . . I was being gay, and it made absolute sense to me that that was what I had to write about." Critics like Barbara Smith and Cheryl Clarke agree that Parker's poems were designed to be spoken, designed to confront both black and women's communities with, as Clarke notes, "the precariousness of being non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual in a racist, misogynist, homophobic, imperial culture."

Parker's five collections of poetry take their central images and process of self-creation as well as political analysis from autobiographical moments in Parker's life and from publicized incidents or community discussions related to race, class, gender, sexuality. The Firebrand Books' edition of *Movement in Black* -- with its title poem and a collection of poems from three earlier Parker collections -- is the only work by Parker that remains consistently in print.



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A well-crafted compilation, *Movement in Black* reflects key patterns in Parker's work: "It is the moment of her creative impulse to communicate: the love, the anger, the fear, that powerful sense of justice -- and injustice -- the cynicism, the humor that she gives us," Cheryl Clarke notes in a review of this collection. Of the work overall, Clarke continues, "Her themes are circular and cumulative. The earlier poems . . . are monothematic, short, sharp; the later poems . . . are multi-thematic, reaching back to older themes to integrate them into newer, expanded concepts, completing the circle and sharply demarcating the black lesbian poet's space in the hermetic world of Afro-American letters."

The "Goat Child" of *Child of Myself*, Parker's first collection, chafes at the confinement and conformity she's expected to learn in marriage, and then tentatively comes out as a lesbian via several love poems to women. Often a bold speaker, the poet opens *Pit Stop*, a 1974 publication, with the line "My lover is a woman" in a poem that addresses interracial relationships. She also offers readers the sweet "I Kumquat You" and strident "Bitch! / I want to scream" in love poems that line up before the collection's long title poem addressing alcoholism: "a pit is a coward's suicide / a hearty drink to anything. " Pit Stop is also infused with dreams, "not [just] Martin's" or Malcolm's or those of political allies, but "a simple dream" that juxtaposes the dreams of human/racial equality with gay liberation: "In my dream - / I can walk the streets / holding hands with my lover" without fear of retaliation or disdain from erstwhile allies.

By 1978, Parker had gained a larger audience for her poetry. Recorded anthologies in collaboration with Judy Grahn brought the sound of Parker's poetry to women across the U.S. , and an ever-growing feminist press brought collections like *Womanslaughter* into feminist bookstores and women's studies classrooms across the country. This collection, like the later *Jonestown and Other Madness*, places family legacies, humorous skepticism, and political exposition at the center of what Grahn calls "continuing Black tradition of radical poetry," creating a body of work that reveals, as Clarke explains, "a black lesbian-feminist perspective of love between women and the circumstances that prevent our intimacy and liberation." All of this -- from humor to liberation -- is apparent in the often circulated poems "For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend" and "For The Straight Folks Who Don't Mind Gays But Wish They Weren't So BLATANT."



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Also, the harshly elegant autobiographical title poem “Womanslaughter” places the reader alongside Parker as the poet’s older sister is murdered and the sister’s soon-to-be ex-husband put on trial:

What was his crime?
He only killed his wife. But a divorce I say. Not final, they say;
Her things were his
including her life.

Convicted not of murder but of “womanslaughter” because “Men cannot kill their wives. / They passion them to death. “ For this murder in Texas, he served one year in a work-release program; three years after this murder in Texas, Parker vows “I will come to my sisters / not dutiful, / I will come strong.”

Finally, *Jonestown and Other Madness*, considers what isn’t -- what love isn’t, what liberation isn’t, what justice isn’t; and what is -- love and alliances, family legacies and strength. This last collection, published before Parker’s death in 1989 from breast cancer, ends both with a desire for more time to write and a legacy to her daughters. In “Maybe I Should Have Been a Teacher,” Parker chronicles the daily life that keeps her from writing, and says:

maybe
the next person
who asks
‘Have you
written anything new?’
just might get hit.



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At the end of “Legacy” -- a multi-section poem that moves readers from prologue to chronicling of individual family legacies -- Parker says,

Take the strength that you may
wage a long battle. Take the pride that you can
never stand small. Take the rage that you can
never settle for less.

These are the legacies Parker passes on to her daughters, on to her many public readers. At her death, Pat Parker was survived by her long-time partner Marty Dunham and two daughters, Cassidy Brown and Anastasia Dunham Parker.

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