

3116 Country Club Drive (Sinister Wisdom) Historic Designation Report

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Sandwiched between the newly renovated Shamrock Gardens Elementary School and the long-standing Charlotte Country Club, there is a place that means more to the lesbian separatist movement than perhaps any other building in the country. This place isn't a commercial property or famed cultural center; it is simply a residential house in the quiet East Charlotte neighborhood of Country Club Heights. If you were to drive past it today, you would have no idea what it means to countless generations of lesbian women in Charlotte, the Southeast, and beyond. Yet, this one-story, single-family home with its prominent brick chimney and well-manicured lawn is the founding location of *Sinister Wisdom*—the nation's longest running lesbian journal of 47 years and counting.

The current structure at 3116 Country Club Drive in Charlotte, North Carolina was first built in 1946. Since then, it has changed ownership several times. Its most significant period of ownership was between July 15, 1974 and July 12, 1978, when Catherine Nicholson purchased the property from Michael and Lucille Burke and resided there with her partner Harriet Ellenberger (Des Moines).¹ The four-year period concluded with the sale of the house to John William Jenkins and Charlotte D. Belk.² Despite the relatively short timeframe, Catherine and Harriet's presence in Country Club Heights made a significant impact—both in terms of the formation of *Sinister Wisdom* and their presence as openly lesbian women in a conservative southern neighborhood, a reality that eventually led the women to relocate out of North Carolina.

¹ State of North Carolina and Mecklenburg County, "Individual Deed, Book 3692, Page 0809," July 15, 1974.

² State of North Carolina and Mecklenburg County, "Individual Deed, Book 4082, Page 0264," July 12, 1978.

However, North Carolina proved to be inescapable for Catherine Nicholson, who was born in Troy, NC in 1922 and eventually retired in Durham.³ She attended the now-defunct Flora MacDonald College in Red Springs before pursuing a Master's degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Catherine eventually left the state for obtain yet another Master's as well as a PhD from Northwestern University only to end up back in North Carolina when she secured a tenured faculty position in the theater department at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. While she credits Chicago with her lesbian awakening, her time in Charlotte turned her into a prominent figure within lesbian separatism—a movement born out of second-wave feminism that encouraged women to rid themselves of the patriarchy by living entirely separate from men. Catherine had always been somewhat of a radical figure within the academic and theater communities, but she claimed that Harriet was responsible for her political activation, once stating: “For the first time in my life, I have become a political activist—Harriet, my young partner, had been married to a Marxist professor, and during the ‘60s she had been active in Leftist causes, so she taught me how to view the world through political lenses.”⁴

Harriet had been a wife and stepmother prior to meeting Catherine at the Charlotte Women's Center in the early 1970s. She was only thirty years old at the time, but she fell hard for the 54-year-old professor. By January of 1976, both women “had chosen to resign the roles [they] had played in the patriarchy.”⁵ Harriet left her husband, and Catherine left her position at UNC Charlotte “in a rage against sexism.” Additionally, and perhaps even more importantly, both women had also left the Charlotte Women's Center along with other members of a separatist group

³ Beth Hodges, “Tribute to Catherine Nicholson,” *Sinister Wisdom: A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal*, sinisterwisdom.org/catherinenicholson.

⁴ Impetus for *Sinister Wisdom*, RL.00950, Box 11, Catherine Nicholson Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book Manuscript Library, Duke University Archives, Durham, NC. archives.lib.duke.edu/catalog/nicholsoncatherine.

⁵ New Publication, RL.00950, Box 11, Catherine Nicholson Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book Manuscript Library, Duke University Archives, Durham, NC. archives.lib.duke.edu/catalog/nicholsoncatherine.

called the Drastic Dykes.⁶ Historian La Shonda Mims considers this exodus of lesbian separatists from the Charlotte Women’s Center a turning point in the movement as well as major impetus for the creation of *Sinister Wisdom*.

When Drastic Dykes left the CWC, the ability for lesbian women in Charlotte to come together in a safe space suddenly disappeared. Just like Catherine and Harriet, who were now unemployed with rapidly thinning savings, these women were confined to their homes—disconnected from each other. The disconnection eventually wore Catherine down as she found “it difficult to survive on rage alone.” She claimed she was “ready to experience the ‘power of presence of each other’” by connecting likeminded women who were actively making the same choice to remove themselves from the patriarchy.⁷ She just didn’t know how to cultivate that power of presence in Charlotte, North Carolina.

This is where *Sinister Wisdom* was born. Though Catherine often stated that the journal grew out of her and Harriet’s love for each other and rage against the patriarchy, which is certainly true, she also admitted to being hungry for connection. Overall, the couple “felt isolated and oppressed in the city of Charlotte.”⁸ They were desperate for a space that allowed lesbians to create and sustain a separatist community, but occupying physical space proved to be challenging as out-of-the-closet lesbians. In her article “Drastic Dykes: The New South and Lesbian Life,” Mims details what life in Country Club Heights was really like for Catherine and Harriet:

[They] felt isolated in their idyllic neighborhood where they knew few neighbors and lived in fear of hostile male neighbors, including a national leader of the Ku Klux Klan. They found their sloped driveway routinely littered at the top with broken bottles that could not be seen from the road. When their cat was shot, [Harriet] confronted a male neighbor who habitually watched them from his front porch across the street and was possibly responsible for the broken bottles. She remembered that when he answered the door a rifle was visible

⁶ La Shonda Mims, “Drastic Dykes: The New South and Lesbian Life,” *Journal of Women’s History* 31, no. 4 (2019): 111–33.

⁷ New Publication. Box 11.

⁸ Mims. “Drastic Dykes.” 121.

in the entryway, and she was too scared to question any more neighbors about the cat's injuries.⁹

Despite the hostility of their neighbors, or perhaps even because of it, Catherine still craved being part of a lesbian separatist community, and she ultimately realized that this community did not need to possess a physical space; it simply required an intellectual one.

She and Harriet had previously found fulfillment in lesbian literary journals, like *Amazon Quarterly*, which no longer existed by the mid-1970s. In fact, most lesbian-specific publications from this era had short a short shelf life. Decades later, Catherine and Harriet would both look back on the success of *Sinister Wisdom* with relative shock. They were certainly proud of the publication, but a long-running lesbian journal was never what they intended. In fact, the only reason they even began collecting literature was because “we had read and were reading everything we could get hold of, but that wasn't enough. We wanted more.”¹⁰ *Sinister Wisdom* was a means of survival for the Drastic Dykes and their lesbian separatism ideals more than anything else. The women half-expected it to stay local, with the occasional subscription going out to a distant friend in Chicago or New York. However, since the editors were able to source material from the likes of Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Rita Mae Brown, and other widely acclaimed writers, it did not take long for people across the country to start talking about this little quarterly journal assembled out of some lesbian's house in Charlotte, NC.

While the quality of writers would certainly become eye catching over time, the first thing most people noticed about *Sinister Wisdom* was its name. Before the publication began its long-tenured run, Catherine and Harriet sent fliers to potential subscribers with details about what the journal will be, when it will be released, how much it cost to subscribe, etc. The majority of text

⁹ Mims. 122.

¹⁰ New Publication.

on the flier, however, was dedicated to explaining the name: “We call our space *Sinister Wisdom* because the root meaning of sinister is ‘from the left side.’ The law of the Fathers equates right-over-left and white-over-black and heterosexual-over-homosexual and male-over-female with good-over-evil. We want to turn these patriarchal values upside down as a necessary prelude to creating our own.”¹¹ In every subsequent interview or account of *Sinister Wisdom*’s history, Catherine and Harriet have echoed this exact explanation for the journal’s name, though they sometimes also credited *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ for initially alerting them to the phrase.¹²

Regardless of where the name came from or why they decided to use it, it soon became a phrase that meant more to the lesbian separatist movement than any other as it filled “the void left in the national lesbian print culture landscape” by the discontinuation of *Amazon Quarterly*. Even with its modest Charlotte means, *Sinister Wisdom* was primed for national attention from the moment it was conceived. “The idea and publication of *Sinister Wisdom*,” Mims explains, “served to unify, not divide, women, and the [founders] certainly accomplished a change in their own worlds and in those of many isolated lesbian feminists who looked to lesbian publishing for support and community.”¹³

Part of this so-called “change in their own world” happened right at home—at 3116 Country Club Drive. In the early days of producing the journal, the home would host *Sinister Wisdom* production parties that were heralded as big community events.¹⁴ The goal of each party was to layout the journal ahead of its publication deadline, but the moniker of “party” was certainly apt. What these parties really meant was that, in a city that was considered isolating for out

¹¹ Subscription Flier, RL.00950, Box 11, Catherine Nicholson Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book Manuscript Library, Duke University Archives, Durham, NC. archives.lib.duke.edu/catalog/nicholsoncatherine.

¹² CN Interview, RL.00950, Box 11, Catherine Nicholson Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book Manuscript Library, Duke University Archives, Durham, NC. archives.lib.duke.edu/catalog/nicholsoncatherine.

¹³ Mims. 117.

¹⁴ Mims. 121.

lesbians—the people who were no longer welcome at the Charlotte Women’s Center due to separatist tension—there was suddenly a place to go. While the goal of the journal was to occupy intellectual space, Catherine and Harriet never complained about hosting a physical one—even with the broken bottles and injured cat. The ability to foster community through a mailed publication was rewarding, but having a place to physically exist was refreshing. The production parties at 3116 Country Club Drive rejuvenated the ever-social couple and empowered them to keep going for another year.

Eventually, participation in the production of *Sinister Wisdom* began falling off. There is no noted record of why participation faltered after the success of the first year, but it left Catherine and Harriet with the brunt of the work. They sourced the material, edited the material alongside the authors, constructed layouts by copying and pasting things together, and then they brought it to the publishing house. The production parties of the past turned the work into fun, social gatherings. In its second year of publication, *Sinister Wisdom* started to feel more like a full-time job. Of course, this didn’t make the work any less fulfilling and the journal grew significantly with each new issue, but the camaraderie of a shared physical space was missing. After the final completing the final issue of Volume 2, Catherine and Harriet sold their house at 3116 Country Club Drive and moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, where they continued the publication of *Sinister Wisdom*. The couple continued in their capacity as co-editors for three more years, publishing a total of 16 issues, before handing over the reins to Michelle Cliff and Adrienne Rich in Amherst, Massachusetts.¹⁵ This began a trend of the new editors in new places all over the country before the journal eventually landed in its permanent home of Berkeley, California.

¹⁵ Catherine & Harriet Timeline, RL.00950, Box 13, Catherine Nicholson Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book Manuscript Library, Duke University Archives, Durham, NC. archives.lib.duke.edu/catalog/nicholsoncatherine.

No matter where *Sinister Wisdom* went or ended up, its roots will always be firmly planted at 3116 Country Club Drive in Charlotte, North Carolina. Without the unique circumstances that the city created—the oppression and isolation they felt in their Country Club Heights home, the desire to connect with other lesbians following the Drastic Dykes’ departure from the Charlotte Women’s Center, the sexism Catherine raged against at UNC Charlotte when she quit her tenured position—the nation’s longest running lesbian publication would not exist. Its foundation is uniquely situated in Charlotte, and its existence not only impacted lesbian women on a national scale but created a vibrant local community in a city that appeared much more conservative on the surface.

The historic designation of this home would serve to recognize the importance of *Sinister Wisdom* and the many queer women who brought it to life. It is a testament to LGBTQ+ history not only existing in the South but being made here—something that is often overlooked, if not disputed, by mainstream narratives. The reasons for designation stand on their own, but the need for Charlotte to be more active in its recognition of its LGBTQ+ history is also profound. To learn more about the significance of Catherine Nicholson, Harriet Desmoines, *Sinister Wisdom*, and the Drastic Dykes of Charlotte, please see *Drastic Dykes and Accidental Activists: Queer Women in the Urban South* by La Shonda Mims.