

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SARAH SCHULMAN

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Sarah Schulman, the New York writer and activist for lesbian and gay liberation, was in Seville as guest speaker in the II Congress on Gay and Lesbian Culture held in 2006 at the University of Seville. The author of nine novels chronicling lesbian and gay life in New York over several decades, which have achieved a cult status among lesbian readers well beyond the limits of the US, several plays staged both in avant-garde and uptown venues, and four nonfiction books on American culture, she spoke on familial homophobia, the subject of one of her works in progress, to an audience that was warmly receptive in spite of the need for translation. She was kind enough to grant me the following interview, where she gives her perceptive, highly critical and sometimes humorous visions, dealing with her own work, lesbian and gay culture, and American society.<sup>1</sup>

**María Angeles Toda:** The first question I would like to ask you is the following: as far as I see, your first novels were published earlier than your active intervention in gay and lesbian politics...

**Sarah Schulman:** Yes...

**MAT:** How did you begin to write, how did you begin to get involved in activism, and what is the relation between one thing and the other?

**SS:** Ok. Well, I come from a political family. My grandparents were immigrants; my grandfather was a draft resister in World War I, and went to prison, and my mother was on the fringes of the Communist party, but not a member; so I was raised with a left-wing view, and so, as a child my family was involved against the war in Vietnam, and that sort of thing, so I grew up with that, and so I was politically active since, you know, like six. There was never

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed account of Schulman's career and publications can be found at *The Biographicon*: <[http://www.biographicon.com/view/6ai1/Sarah\\_Schulman](http://www.biographicon.com/view/6ai1/Sarah_Schulman)>

a time when that wasn't true. The first thing I wrote was also when I was six. I started a diary, and I think this was because my grandmother had given me a copy of the diary of Anne Frank, and the message I got from that book is that girls could be writers, so I started writing a diary. So I wrote my whole childhood, I never stopped, and all through my whole life; I was always writing. In high school I wrote the play that all the kids did, and all that kind of thing... Now in terms of gay and lesbian connection to writing, let me think... when would that start? In college, I was part of the feminist organization, and I also wrote for the newspaper, so that would already be a connection...

**MAT:** So it came through feminism, in a way?

**SS:** You know, I went to this special high school called Hunter High School, which was a public free high school for smart girls. Audre Lorde went there also, actually. There were a lot of mostly middle- and working- class people, people who would not go to private high school, very smart and intellectually engaged girls. This was right as feminism was starting, because I finished high school in 1975, and abortion became legal in 1973. So in our high school we had consciousness-raising for the girls--

**MAT:** Official?

**SS:** No, it wasn't official, but one of the teachers was going to consciousness-raising and she decided to start it for us. So, you know, it was always there; I became a teenager right as feminism was happening. And I had my first girlfriend at high school. So it was all mixed up. In 1979, I dropped out of college, and I moved back to New York, and I started working at a feminist newspaper called *Womennews*, and I also worked for *Gay Community News*, which was the Socialist gay paper, and I also was the gay person at a left-wing paper which was called *The Guardian*, so I had three different identities at three different newspapers. It shows you how much has changed in the United States, as now none of those papers exists.

**MAT:** What about your position as the gay person in the leftist newspaper?

**SS:** Oh, yes... Well, this was a Marxist newspaper, it was called *The Guardian* and it had existed for about sixty years. When they finally decided to include gay people, they had a big debate, and they allowed one or two gay people to come and write for them. But we had a conflict with them, because they decided that they supported gay rights, but would not support gay liberation, so anything that was gay liberation, they were not in favour of; so they did not accept the critique of heterosexuality. But I also worked at *The Nation*. Do you know *The Nation* magazine? Right now it's the biggest left-wing magazine, and I wrote their first piece on AIDS, and all of this. They historically had terrible

coverage of gay people; even today, horrible. I had big meetings with them, and I gave them a list of like twenty-five articles they should be doing, and they never did anything. And the article I wrote about AIDS that was their first coverage of AIDS was about AIDS and the homeless, not gay people. So to start with, the left-wing was horrible on gay themes, and in fact myself and six other women were kicked out of the feminist organization called CARASA<sup>2</sup>, which was a abortion rights organization, in a lesbian purge they had in 1982.

**MAT:** In 1982? That's pretty late. I thought that kind of conflict had been earlier.

**SS:** This was actually a left-wing women's organization, so they were more behind in sexual politics.

**MAT:** So, as you've said, both processes went together, but when did you decide to publish fiction?

**SS:** Well, I started as a journalist in these newspapers in 1979, and I was also making plays; my first play was 1979, and I had this lesbian audience, because in these days none of the avant-garde theaters would allow lesbian work, they didn't take it seriously; so there was a separate sphere of lesbian-only work that nobody else saw, so we would have these plays where the audience was completely packed, totally sold out with lesbians. Nobody else came. We couldn't get anyone to review us, because no-one respected us. We used to stand on the street in my neighborhood and wait for gay women to walk by and give them invitations for the play. So in this way, I was already developing a relationship with the gay community as a writer. That is, they would take a gay newspaper, a leftist newspaper, and read what I wrote about them, they would come to see a play that I wrote about them, so there was already this intimate relationship. My first novel [*The Sophie Horowitz Story*] was published in '84, and by that time I was already in people's minds as someone that they had a relationship with. So it's all been community-based from the first day, you know.

**MAT:** I would like to ask you what is for me an unusual question, and one that I would have never dared to ask, unless you had mentioned in our previous conversation, in relation to Anna [the main character in *Empathy*] that your parents were both psychoanalysts—

**SS:** No, no, no. My father was a psychiatrist, my mother was a social worker. My father worked in a city hospital, my mother worked in a city agency, and I teach in the city university. The people of New York are the family business.

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<sup>2</sup> Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse, founded in 1976.

**MAT:** Oh, I see. In any case, the question that I wanted to ask is how far is there an autobiographical element in your writing?

**SS:** Well, if you ask me a particular thing, I can tell you if it is true or not...

**MAT:** Well, for example, that underside of New York that appears for instance in *People in Trouble* or in *Rat Bohemia*...

**SS:** Well, that was really my world. I mean, it's not something that I could have made up.

**MAT:** No, I'm not saying it's not real; I'm asking whether it was part of your own personal experience...

**SS:** Oh, that was totally my world. I mean, that world stopped existing because of AIDS. But before that, that's where it all happened. Just to be an openly lesbian person, doing politics and making art, meant that you were *so* marginal. The only place you could live is in that sphere; it was almost like a quasi-criminal environment in some ways, a lot of deprivation, a lot of poverty, a lot of people who'd been kicked out of their families, a lot of confusion, and then like some really great people doing amazing things, but all mixed together.

**MAT:** Like the character of Rita [the protagonist of *Rat Bohemia*], when she is kicked out of her home when she's still very young...

**SS:** That's very autobiographical. But I never was a rat exterminator [laughter].

**MAT:** No, no... That leads me to another thing that I wanted to ask you, which is the role of the city...<sup>3</sup>

**SS:** Well, I'm a real New Yorker; my mother was born in Brooklyn, so I'm second-generation New Yorker. I know the city *so* well, I totally know it, and it so happens that when I started writing is when gentrification just began, so when I first started writing I didn't realize that urbanity as I knew it was going to be completely transformed in front of my eyes. And then, by the time the novel *Girls, Visions and Everything* started, this thing started to happen in New York where wealthy white people who had grown up in the suburbs wanted to move back into the city, and started to move into mixed neighborhoods, and kick out everybody else; and they liked a homogenized American culture, they were anti-urban people, they had a suburban sensibility. And I didn't know that this was a global phenomenon, and I didn't know it was a phenomenon of world capitals; all

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<sup>3</sup> See my essay, "Nueva York en la narrativa de Sarah Schulman y David Leavitt."

I knew was that in my neighborhood this thing was happening, so it became part of the novels, and now if you read them chronologically they become an account of the gentrification of New York City, which is really strange, but when you're doing it you do not realize that that's what it's going to be.

**MAT:** Several critics, like Javier Sáenz in Spain, have commented on the very harsh nature of your stories, but also on the presence of a certain sense of humor...

**SS:** That's very Jewish. I have a Woody Allen kind of humor, you know, deadpan, it's kind of flat-like. And what happened is that when I first started writing, I didn't know it was funny, and when I would read it out loud, people would laugh and laugh and laugh, because that kind of deadpan was just my absolutely natural language. But because of Woody Allen movies, the whole world is now familiar with this kind of timing, and so you can just do it, and everyone laughs at it, it's really funny.

**MAT:** Still now? Because—

**SS:** Yes. Everyone knows it everywhere you go. You know, it's really interesting.

**MAT:** So then it's general—Well, and here we go into the general/specific question: Do you consider any of that humor specifically gay? because there is the humor that we tend to associate with the gay and lesbian community, not necessarily camp—I remember your reference to meeting another gay or lesbian person on the lift for two minutes, exchanging a couple of words, and knowing exactly what you're talking about.

**SS:** [*in a mock-conspiratorial tone*] Gay code...

**MAT:** Aha!

**SS:** My work is very insider; most of my settings are of New York city, I only write about things I really really know. So insiders always make jokes about their own condition. Like even now, I'm doing a play in New York next season, which is an adaptation of a Isaac Bashevis Singer novel about holocaust survivors [*Enemies, a Love Story*], and it's hysterically funny.<sup>4</sup> For any group of people who are suffering, if they themselves are telling the story, it's funny, because that's how people deal with it. This happens when writing about AIDS, and it's so funny. When I started writing about AIDS, gay people would laugh and laugh, and straight people were afraid to laugh, because they didn't think they were supposed to laugh at that. That's a sign of writing from the inside.

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<sup>4</sup> *Enemies, a Love Story* premiered at The Wilma Theater, Philadelphia in February 2007.

**MAT:** You started with plays, then moved to novel-writing, and within the novels you seem to use very different genres: you've used the detective-story pattern, you've used realism, you've used postmodernism... Any preferences? Any reasons for the shift in modes?

**SS:** It depends on the subject matter. You know, when I wrote *People in Trouble*, it's really like a nineteenth-century realist social novel; in fact I based it on *Germinal* by Zola, and the reason was that I had just written *Empathy* and I had had more experience with a more innovative form, and I was more sophisticated at it. So what I realized is that when you are trying to explain a historical moment, or when you're trying to define or invent a literature about a whole new phenomenon, realism is a lot more effective, because the reader has no previous experience of the subject. If you're writing about love you can refer to all these previous things and the reader knows what you're talking about, but if this is the first novel about AIDS that they're ever going to read, they don't know what you're talking about, so I needed realism.

**MAT:** A familiar element, in a way, to counteract the unfamiliar theme?

**SS:** Yes, it's necessary. Whereas *Empathy*, which was about identity, demanded formal invention, because that's what the subject was. So it really depends on the subject matter. My most recently published novel [in 2006] is *Shimmer*—

**MAT:** Yes, and I was going to comment that this is perhaps the only novel which is not set in the present.

**SS:** That's because I needed to get away from AIDS, and the only way to get away from it was to go into the past. But that's a historical fiction, a wholly different thing, carefully researched, and all that kind of stuff, and that was really fun. But I have three novels and one non-fiction book which are not published, which I've written since then, and one of them [*The Child*], which was ready for publication in 1999, is finally being published next year [2007] because I could not find a publisher for it. The reason there was because it's about a sexual relationship between a fourteen-year-old boy and a forty-year-old man, and the man gets arrested, and he's defended in court by a lesbian lawyer, and the novel does not come out against the relationship. It asks the question about gay children, or young gay people, and their condition of alienation, and in that situation, I believe that sexual relationships with adults can be a positive experience, given that people have no support. So that's my argument for the book, and in this Bush era, forget it! You can't publish a book like that; you have to publish a book that comes out against this, because it's morally wrong, but you can't make it ambiguous or complex, so it's taken me eight years to get it published. And then I had a novel, a futuristic dystopic novel, about a future where there is only one

profession, and that's marketing, and every single person works in marketing, and the whole book is written in advertising slogans. I think it's really good, but it's so ultra-experimental!<sup>5</sup> That's why it is being published in 2009 by a Canadian publisher. A novel-in-exile. But again, realism is the aesthetic choice of conservatism, and always has been, and formal invention is something that is very frightening to people of the United States. So, that's been difficult, you know, but I hope I'll be able to start getting back into print soon.

**MAT:** Well, actually, I was going to ask you later about your work in progress, but now we've started on that subject--

**SS:** Yes, I have those two books. I have a third novel based on Balzac's *Cousin Bette*, and it's set in the 1950s, about the invention of television advertising, so it's a little esoteric.<sup>6</sup> And then I have this huge book that I wrote which took me ten years to write, about homophobia in the family; it's a theory book.

**MAT.** It hasn't come out yet, has it?

**SS:** I can't find a publisher for it, because you know, it's an entirely new discourse, and when people read it, there's so many new ideas, and so many new paradigms, and it's completely out of context. It's not a moment in the US when anything new can come forward; we're so trapped right now. And I know that hopefully soon that will change and new ideas will come forward, but people don't want to look at something that they don't recognize. I believe this book can open up an entirely new paradigm in gay and lesbian thinking; but that's the problem, because everything now is derivative. And the other issue is that in the old days, theory was written by gay people; now it's written by academics.

**MAT:** In fact I was going to suggest why not an academic press, apart from the fact that at least here in Spain that would have the problem of very poor distribution; there seem to be a lot of things that are printed but nobody ever reads.

**SS:** Well, I published *Stagestruck* with Duke. It was still rare for someone like me to publish it there. In the subsequent ten years, academia has produced many, many, many, many people with Ph dissertations or books they want to publish on gay and lesbian studies, and they now own all academic publishing territory. So for a person like myself, who is not a scholar, who's a community-based thinker, there's no venue. But it's really strange; if you think of the history of lesbian ideas, there's people like Audre Lorde, people like Adrienne Rich, these were people who also were community-based thinkers; you know, they didn't do *Survey of Literature*, they just had original thought. That type of book has no venue right now.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Mere Future* will be published by Arsenal Pulp Press in September 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Provisional title \**Cousin Bette on the Burning Deck (Biographicon)*.

**MAT:** And in specific gay and lesbian presses you'd have the problem of perhaps—

**SS:** Well, what are gay and lesbian presses? I mean, they're so tiny, and they do Best Erotica Volume 37, like that's what they basically do [*laughter*]. They do erotica, they do detective novels, but they don't do books of *gravitas*.

**MAT:** As to your theatre work, I would like to go back to your beginnings in performance work within this strongly community-based world.

**SS:** I was part of the East Village arts movement, which was small, it was a few thousand people. It had global influence, I mean, when you think of the people who came out of there, Keith Haring, Nan Goldin, all these kinds of people, they had an awesome influence, but it lasted very little time, because of AIDS. So that's where I worked, in that interdisciplinary kind of life/art political performance, from '79 till '94. By the time '94 came around, I realized that this entire experimental milieu was dead, people had literally died. The neighborhood had been gentrified, the theaters were closed, the whole thing had just stopped. So I decided I wanted to become a mainstream playwright, and then I had to learn to write differently, because avant-garde is so far ahead of mainstream in every art form, and the same thing is true for living performance. Conventional commercial American theater is a very, very conservative art form, and all the discovery of interdisciplinary avant-garde, they had not reached that, so I had to learn how to write in a much more conservative way. So it took me from like '94 to 2002 to finally get a play done in a big, big theatre.<sup>7</sup> And also, there's no lesbian play in the entire American repertoire. They're so far behind. It's not like books, because, you see, books are a mass article. Publishers in the United States need to sell hundreds of thousands of copies, so they need to publish Asian people, they need to publish Black people, because Asian people and Black people buy books. Theatres are small little buildings that only need to sell a certain number of seats, so it's a very elite art form, it's not a mass art form. And right now, they don't sell seats to disenfranchised or oppressed communities. They sell seats only to dominant-culture community. So, for someone like me, I'm coming in there, when I get a play in one of these theatres, suddenly my audience appears out of the woodwork. Suddenly all these lesbians are coming to 42nd street, to a theatre they've never been to, buying a ticket at a price they've never paid before. They don't know the etiquette of how to behave in these places, it's amazing to watch; and the people who run the theaters are flabbergasted, they've never seen these people before, and yet they buy tickets so the shows sell out, sell out, sell out. So they're bringing a whole audience, and then when I leave, they never come back to that theatre, so I bring a new kind of audience into that theater.

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<sup>7</sup> *Carson McCullers: Historically Inaccurate* premiered at Playwrights Horizons, New York, in 2002 (*Biographicon*).



**MAT:** In relation to this, in several interviews you have mentioned that your ideal would be that lesbian writing should be considered simply writing, American writing, American fiction or American drama, postmodern or realist or whatever it may be, and the difficulty of getting readers to universalize to lesbian protagonists. When you're telling me this, it suggests that what is difficult to do is not only to get a play staged in a mainstream theater, but to get it watched by the kind of audience that would normally go to that theater. Obviously, it's very valuable for these lesbian viewers to have the experience that you have been describing, but—

**SS:** No, I'm not saying that. I'm not saying that straight people don't come.

**MAT:** You're emphasizing that the people who would never go—

**SS:** Right, right. I'm talking of an additional audience. And this is important from a financial point of view, because you're bringing in money and audiences that these people had never seen before.

**MAT:** And besides, staging the play in that kind of physical setting also changes its reception.

**SS:** Oh, yes. My last play [*Manic Flight Reaction*] was on 42<sup>nd</sup> street, which is like *the* main street of American theater, and all these women came to see it, and there had never been a lesbian play on 42<sup>nd</sup> street.<sup>8</sup> We had great actors, a great director, great designers, and women came who were very achieved, like Carolyn Dinshaw, an academic who runs the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at NYU. They're women in their forties and fifties who are very achieved, they came to my play and they have never seen themselves represented at a high level in their entire lives till they came. It's powerful. So it's well, let's go, let's expand what is seen in the mainstream.

**MAT:** And what about the mainstream reaction?

**SS:** Well, it's mixed. I mean, gay men control the theater, and they are very hostile to the lesbian point of view, extremely hostile. Straight men are quite interested, and most of the people who have put money into my plays are straight men, because they're fascinated by women, and so am I; so when I put women on stage and I try to understand their psychology, they're also very interested. Gay men, they see women on stage, they're bored. The other thing is that when you bring in something new, especially in a conservative time, you get two different reactions. On one hand, you get people who say, "What is this? I've never seen this before, I don't understand it, therefore it's wrong and badly written." And

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<sup>8</sup> Premiered at Playwrights Horizons, New York, in 2005 (*Biographicon*).

then there are other people who are like “Wow! I’ve never seen this before and it’s so exciting!” So you get completely split reactions, and that’s what I get all the time. If you do a search on the reactions to my plays, you will see some of them are cruel and vicious, horrible, mean, personal attacks from gay men, in, like, *The New York Times*, and then you’ll see all the other stuff: people are totally excited, it’s selling out. This is what confuses the theater. Normally, if you get terrible reviews, nobody comes to your play, but I get terrible reviews and the play sells out and sells out and sells out and sells out, and that’s what they don’t understand: who are these people and why are they here? Because my people don’t care what *The New York Times* says; *The New York Times* has never told the truth about them, and they don’t look there to find out what to see. They have a twenty-five-year relationship with me, they’ve read all my books, and they know it’s going to be for them. So in a way it’s review-proof, which is very strange.

**MAT:** You’ve used “my people,” and yet you have just said all that you’ve said about the hostility of gay men, who were also at one point “your people.” Are gay men still “your people”?

**SS:** Oh, you mean—Well, you know, I am angry about that, because I feel that I did a lot for gay men. A lot. I really spent many years of my life—I made a big contribution to AIDS and AIDS literature, and their hostility towards me personally and my lesbian perspective, I am furious about it.

**MAT:** Well, I feel it’s something that needs to be said. I think it’s something that happens in many groups where lesbians and gay men act together; there’s always this kind of conflict, of lesbians being involved in gay men’s issues and gay men not wanting to involve themselves in lesbian issues.

**SS:** But I’m vying with that at a very high level, because in *The New York Times*, you can’t get higher than that, they did a major article on me this year, about how terrible I am; I don’t know if you got to read it, it’s called “Who’s Afraid of Sarah Schulman?”<sup>9</sup> It was huge, a whole page and a half, in *The New York Times*, by this gay man, about how people—he meant white gay men—are so afraid of me, how they don’t like me, they think I’m a terrible person, how come I’m getting so far, how come I’ve been able to break through all these systems that nobody else can break through, ‘cause I’m such a bitch, ‘cause I’m so terrible—and it was like “wow!” And I read that, and it was really scary, because of so much power that they have. But the truth is they can’t stop me, and that’s what that showed me. There’s been all these years of their hostility, and I’ve been breaking through and breaking through, because I really have so much credibility with my own community, that financially they can’t stop it. So it was

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<sup>9</sup> Jesse Green, “Who’s Afraid of Sarah Schulman?”, *The New York Times*, 23rd October 2005. [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/23/theater/newsandfeatures/23gree.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/23/theater/newsandfeatures/23gree.html?_r=1)

really interesting, it was really exciting; so they want to take it to the level of *The New York Times*, ok, let's do it.

**MAT:** Is this hostility also related to the fact that there are more lesbians in positions of power in a way, with an acquisitive level?

**SS:** Yes.

**MAT:** So that's a change as well.

**SS:** Well, the people who were, you know, little dykes, twenty-year-old dykes reading my books, are now forty-year old professionals, who are angry that they don't have any representation. And I think when you have, like I have, a twenty-five-year relationship with my readers, a credibility of twenty-five years, so there's an emotional relationship between me and my audience of --whatever it is, twenty-five thousand to fifty thousand people over the years--, you know, they support me. I have that support. And it makes all the difference. And it allows me to keep going.

**MAT:** Well, this partly answers my next question, which had to do with the non-fiction, *Stagestruck* and *My Gay American History*. How far has the situation that you describe in these books changed?

**SS:** Do you mean, like the social conditions?

**MAT:** Yes.

**SS:** Oh God, we're in such a terrible time now. You know, the United States is such a mess. Let's look at each group individually.

**MAT:** I was referring in particular to the changes within the gay and lesbian community, although they are obviously related to changes in the whole social and political system.

**SS:** There's another problem now, and this is that right now there is no movement. And there's no intellectually engaged subculture, so there's no production of authentic new ideas from a community base, because everything we have has been co-opted.

**MAT:** By academia, by the scholarly community?

**SS:** No, no, by capitalist patriarchy, which is stronger now than it's probably ever been. So the ability to think independently of the marketing culture is really only left for a few individuals. We don't have a subculture. The advantage of the subculture was that because we were invisible, we couldn't be marketed to. Now we're visible, we're totally marketed to, so we don't have a private conversation.

**MAT:** Does that include lesbians too? I mean, the being marketed to. I remember in *Stagestruck* you discussed this question.

**SS:** Right, in '98. Aside from the cable tv series *The L Word*, nothing niche marketed to lesbians has appeared in a commercial realm.<sup>10</sup>

**MAT:** So it's happening, perhaps on a much smaller scale or whatever, but it's happening...

**SS:** It's like Lenin said, the capitalist will sell us the rope with which we will hang him, but it always turns out that the capitalist sells us the rope with which we hang ourselves, and we didn't quite realize it was going to work that way. It all has to be reconfigured in an entirely new way. It can't go back, it can only go forward. One of the things I've noticed, and one of the things I'm hopeful about, is that younger women are being told that they have every equal opportunity and possibility. They become very well-educated, they're very ambitious, they do something that's really good, and then they have no opportunities. And they become extremely angry. I've noticed this, like I've noticed some young writers, maybe thirty years old, very talented, who came in like thinking "wow", they felt that the whole world was going to be for them, and they can't get anywhere. They're furious, they're totally enraged. That generation is going to respond in some way, but they've got to first figure out that they're being lied to. You see, me, no one ever pretended that you had any rights, so we agreed with the culture that we had no rights. They're being lied to that they have rights. But certainly I can't solve that.

**MAT:** What do you think about young writers, both in general terms and within specifically lesbian writing?

**SS:** I like Michelle Tea.<sup>11</sup> Do you know her work? She's good, she's talented. One of the problems is that there is a lot of derivative work. It's ironic, because a lot of the new ideas and new paradigms in literature were pioneered in the '70s and early '80s, and then a couple of things that were invented became stagnant really quickly, like detective fiction, like coming-out story, like this type of thing, and these became repeat, repeat, repeat, so fast—

**MAT:** Formula literature?

**SS:** Yes, so fast, when there's so much that's never been done. But to find a young person that's talented, that has original formal ideas, that is willing to be

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<sup>10</sup> TV series based on the life of a group of Los Angeles lesbians, first shown on the Showtime channel in 2004. Dirs. Ilene Chaiken, Rose Troche. US-Canada.

<sup>11</sup> Michelle Tea (1971), lesbian-oriented San Francisco based writer and performer. Information on her work can be found at <<http://www.languageisavirus.com/michelle-tea>>

openly lesbian in her work... that is a very complicated combination. But I like her work. My favorite is *Rent Girl*.

**MAT:** I was wondering, about this question of formula literature. It seems to me that it has two dangers. On one hand, it's true that to a certain extent, people say "in general terms, it's not a very good novel, but as a lesbian novel it will do, because there are so few"; that is the negative effect of that kind of repetition of the formula. On the other hand, I think that sometimes perhaps we can be too hard on this kind of repetition, which is perfectly normal in mainstream literature: how many novels are there about the older man falling in love with the younger woman?

**SS:** That's true! But the problem is that we are not developing a literary novel. We don't have the same kind of works because of the nature of publishing. It's true, straight people have romances, but they also have literary works, which we don't have any more. But that will change, too.

**MAT:** So in general terms you are hopeful for change.

**SS:** I'm very optimistic. Look at me, I've never given up in my entire life. I'm totally committed, I'm very optimistic, I always have been. I believe that this can all happen, I can see it in my mind. I believe that all these things can be integrated, I believe that there can be a movement that has vigor, I believe in a global conversation, I believe in a lot of that, and I just act like it's happening, and you know, it can, because this is what we know from history: if you're brave, things come through. I'm one of the most optimistic people that you'll ever meet; if you look at the actions of my life, they're all based on the belief that things can change.

**MAT:** Perhaps the last question, in relation to the global perspective. How do you see that as contributing to change in a moment when the conservative reaction is not only in the United States, but also in many other countries, in Africa, in Asia, with the development also of Moslem fundamentalist regimes—

**SS:** And Christian fundamentalist regimes.

**MAT:** Frankly, at this moment I think that the most dangerous Christian fundamentalist regime is the US--

**SS:** Yes, that's what I've said; I'm talking about myself [*Laughter*]—

**MAT:** I'm not aware that this is happening to the same extent elsewhere: perhaps in Latin America, where there is such a strong connection between military power and a certain version of the Church.

**SS:** Right, the US.

**MAT:** To return to the global question: you're sometimes amazed to find out that there is a lesbian rights group in Nigeria, for instance, though normally you hear about it because the leader has been raped, or killed, or something like that.

**SS:** Well, the whole future of the world is in the hands not of the West. The West has shown that they have not been able to make a positive contribution globally. Most of the actions of the West in relation to the rest of the world have been destructive, historically, ever since the West entered into the rest of the world. Whatever the stated intention has been, whether it is to Christianize or democratize or whatever, it's all basically been to colonize. So the West is not going to provide any kind of progressive impulse for the world, it is going to have to come from the rest of the world, and that's probably true at this point for gay culture as well. You know, at first there was a very exciting Western gay subculture, but then in a way it became almost colonial. Like an Americanization of gay culture, there was like a *kitsch* to Western gay culture where people were using the same concepts, using the same imagery, they were derivative; it ceased to be culturally organic. So yes, maybe the future lies with Nigerian lesbians...

In view of the time elapsed since the interview was made and its publication, I contacted Sarah Schulman again to update it via e-mail. These were her answers:

**MAT:** Is there anything you would like to add about your work in progress since the interview in 2006?

**SS:** I have three books coming out this year. In October, the novel *The Mere Future* will be published by Arsenal Pulp Press in hard cover. In November, the New Press will publish *The Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences* which is the first theoretical treatment of homophobia in families and its effects on the individual and culture. That manuscript is done and going to proofs. In the spring of 2010 The University of California Press will publish *The Gentrification Of The Mind: Supremacy Ideology Masquerading As Reality* about the consequences of gentrification on the way we think. This book is longingly awaiting its edit.

**MAT:** How far do you consider that the new US presidency will make change possible?

**SS:** The collapse of the culture of excess primarily causes enormous suffering. Secondly, however, it creates great opportunity for out-moded systems of control to expand and be replaced. Obama has a fatal character flaw which is his need to be liked. So far, after three weeks of presidency this has already led him to horrific compromises in his bailout system that capitulated to a

small number of Republicans because he sought “bi-partisanship.” No one really understands this bailout, but it seems to favor people who pay a lot of taxes, because one of its backbones is tax cuts.

To conclude, in 2009 Schulman was awarded the prestigious Kessler prize from the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at The City University of New York, as an acknowledgement of her lifelong contribution to the field of Gay and Lesbian Studies.

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