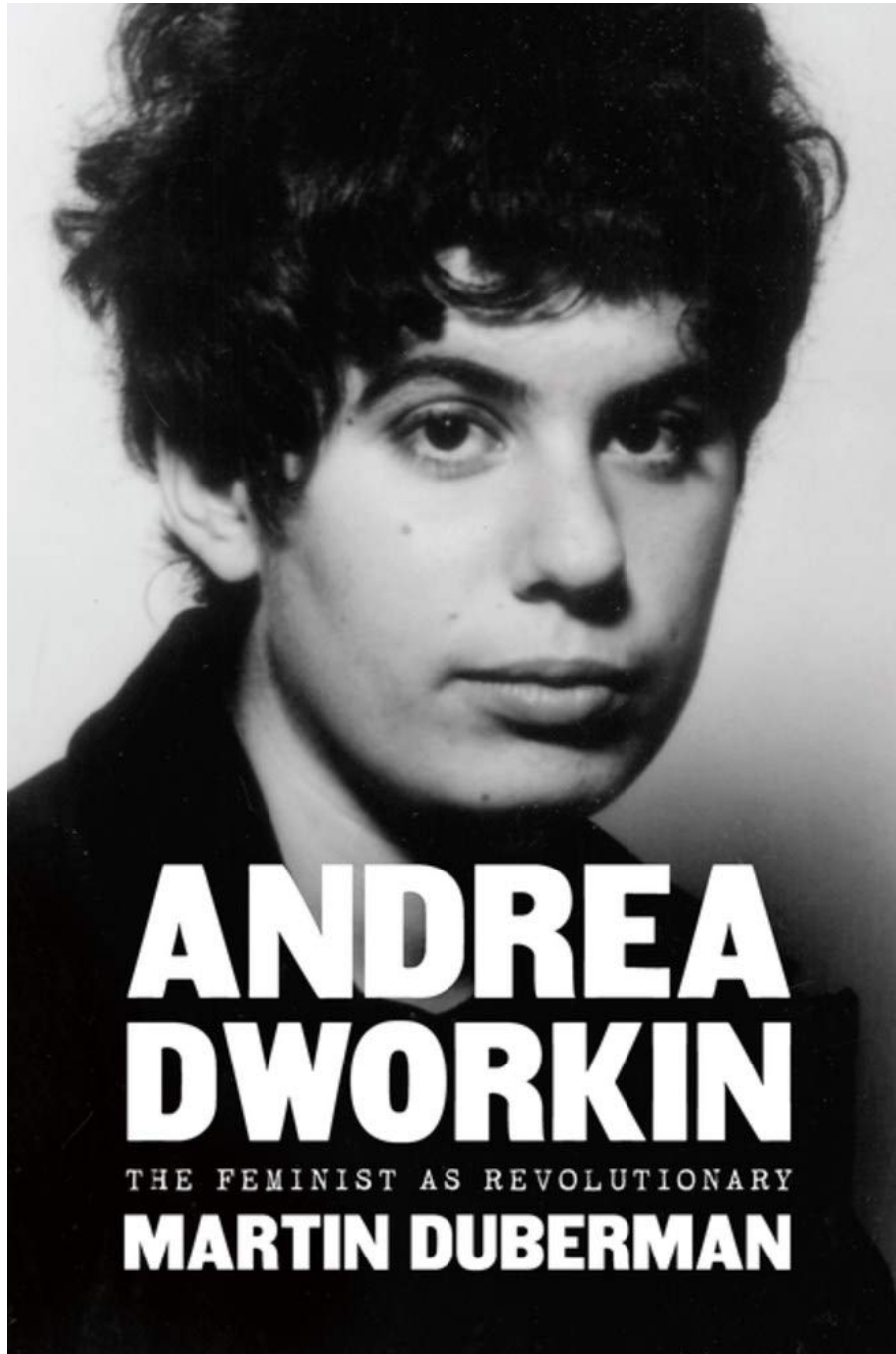


# Woke Andrea Dworkin

by Phyllis Chesler



And there she is, in a black-and-white headshot, on the cover of Martin Duberman's important biography: *Andrea Dworkin: The Feminist as Revolutionary*. She is looking straight at us, her frank j'accuse-like gaze somehow holding us accountable for all the evil in the world. Andrea is only college-aged, but

she already looks intense, serious, stubborn, determined, smoldering, formidable—a woman who cannot be easily dismissed even though she is so young. This Andrea resembles the photos of those women workers on strike in the early 20th century on New York City's Lower East Side, or even those of partisan fighters somewhere in the European woods, in World War II.

Duberman may be the first major historian to write a full-length biography of Andrea both as an intellectual and as an activist. I am grateful to him for doing so. I only wish that this had appeared while she was still alive. Knowing her as I do, I bet she'd challenge parts of it far more strenuously than I will do in this review.

I note, with a heavy heart, that so much of our most radical and visionary work (1967-1979), was not only defamed and disappeared within a decade—but that the books about our movement have also been “disappeared” without a trace. Some of the best minds of my feminist generation, whose works I once treasured, had to die before they would be taken seriously in the mass media. For example, both Mary Daly and Shulamith Firestone had to die before they were treated respectfully by the then-gatekeeping [New York Times](#) (Fox, 2010) and [The New Yorker](#) (Faludi, 2013). Andrea had been dead for 15 years before her work was acknowledged, even praised, and at some length, in the media that used to savage it or simply not review it at all: [twice](#) in [The New York Review](#) (Fateman, 2019; Blair, 2019), [twice](#) in [The New York Times](#) (Goldberg, 2019; Szalai, 2019), and once in [The New Yorker](#) (Oyler, 2019).

Based on letters in her archives, Duberman depicts an Andrea who, like so many women, put up with verbal, physical, and sexual brutality at the hands of her male lover (in Greece) and thereafter, at the hands of a more dangerously violent husband in Holland. Such male behavior was not uncommon at the time in the bohemian and activist circles in which Andrea

moved and in those decades in general (I remember them well). Duberman shows us how abjectly willing Andrea was to cook, clean, shop, sew, give up her writing, and endure extreme physical and sexual violence in order to make her marriage work; a little girl, a frightened woman trying to please Daddy. Despite all that she would come to write and to symbolize, Andrea retained this “little girl” capacity; she was also shy, funny, timid, sweet, and superprotective of those who took care of her.

Duberman captures Andrea’s enormous frustration about being defamed, damned, “buried alive” both by not being reviewed or by being savagely reviewed—often by carefully chosen ideological opponents. He understands her agony about not being able to legally fight back against the most vulgar slander because she could not afford the monstrous costs. He details her chronic disappointment (with friends, publishers, intimates, the universe itself), and finally, her exhaustion, failing health, surgeries, and unexpected, sudden death, far too soon, when she was only 58.

Still, however distinguished he may be (and he is), Duberman is an unusual choice as Andrea’s biographer. He is a prize-winning historian but not one especially noted for his groundbreaking feminist work. Duberman came out as a gay man in 1972, founded the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the City University of New York Graduate School, and has authored at least 25 books. Some books won prizes. Most of his previous biographies were about gay men and about mainly gay *male* movements (he also wrote important books and plays about racism and about anti-racist champions and martyrs).

Duberman also wrote the foreword and collected the essays for a Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, *Queer Ideas*, which includes essays by Joan Nestle, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Monique Wittig, Barbara Smith, Esther Newton, Cherrie Moraga,

and Alisa Solomon. Most of the lesbians included in Duberman's reader identify themselves more as "lesbians," or "queers," than as women. With some exceptions, these are lesbian feminists who are pro-sex and pro-sex work; ardent followers of Jacques Lacan, deconstructionism, and the drama of the "narrative." They write about male homosexuality, drag queens, "gender performativity," the AIDS crisis, and queer nuptials. Perhaps they have all also written widely about incest, rape, woman-battering, pornography, prostitution, and female poverty—but if so, such work does not define or identify them.

I would suggest that Duberman's sense of "sisterhood" with lesbians may primarily be related to the ways in which they are like gay men: focused on sex, sexual and gender identity, sexual activity, butch-femme roles, promiscuity, marginalization, persecution, exile, symbolic resistance, etc. and not so much in terms of their analyses of women's unique fate as "the second sex."

Andrea definitely had a "dark" side, an early life of drugs, promiscuity, poverty, and existential angst, but she was also battered, raped, and self-prostituted. She did not buy men or women for sex. She offered sex in exchange for food, money, and shelter. Andrea was far more cynical than I ever was, and she wore her cynicism proudly as a badge of courage.

Despite her burning hot radical feminism, Andrea was also a Eurocentric leftist. She sent money to the Black Panthers, was antiwar, anti-prison, anti-mental hospital, anti-taxation without representation and, in her early days, was the kind of anarchist who wanted no government—but who still wanted the nonexistent government to provide free housing, free food, free health care, and free education.

Everything and everyone that did not save her, or assist her,

deeply wounded her—but Andrea was also defamed, mocked, dishonored, misunderstood, and legally gagged for telling the truth about women’s lives. She had the kind of power that attracted a cultlike following—according to Duberman, “she breathed fire”—but she also warred with everyone (many of us did; some lucky few did not). Andrea cut people off, cut people down. Still, her work was a world apart from the works of Duberman’s “go-to” lesbians.

Andrea wrote as a woman—and for women. Her primary identity was not in terms of her sexual or gender identity, or her sexual activity. We must have had a thousand conversations in which we never discussed this as an issue. I had no idea whether she was sexual, asexual, bisexual, lesbian, heterosexual, or something else entirely. Perhaps she talked of nothing else to others; I will never know. Duberman tells us more than I need to know about what her husband, John Stoltenberg, a gay man, told him about how he and Andrea made love.

Duberman knows that Andrea-the-thinker is not like gay men, or gay-male identified lesbians. She is “a feminist, not the fun kind,” as she would say. Andrea stood for Woman Brought Low but, to some extent, she could also be viewed as very male-identified. Here is a part of the review I published about her 1993 novel, *Mercy*.

“Andrea Dworkin is, without question, a great writer, a writer’s writer: as “mas-terful” as Miller or Mailer; as passionate as Fanon; as gentle and as world-weary as Baldwin; as much a troubadour on the literary high road as Whitman or Ginsburg or Kerouac; raw and rough and cynical and fierce; pitiless as she challenges God on His lack of “mercy.” Dworkin is bitter, shocking, like Baudelaire or Rimbaud, when they were new in the world; brave, heartbreakingly brave, like Leduc—except the truth is, Dworkin really has no predecessor.”

She told me that she wanted to be buried together with this review. This reveals her kinship with male, not female writers—but these are the writers who have been allowed to succeed, not only because they are great writers but because they are men.

Duberman's biography confirms that in high school and college, other than George Eliot, Andrea read male writers only: Ferlinghetti, Baldwin, Burroughs, Ginsberg, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, Genet, D.H. Lawrence, Orwell, Rimbaud, Kafka. No wonder she loved my review of *Mercy* in which I compared her to these very writers.

In our time, most publishers demand serious fact-checking, legal vetting, and onerous, "politically correct" readings inflicted upon innocent authors by outside "sensitivity" experts on race and gender. This was my experience for two of my 21st-century books. I endured an intense legal vetting in 2013 for [\*An American Bride in Kabul\*](#) (2013) and an even more intense legal vetting for my 2018 book, [\*A Politically Incorrect Feminist\*](#). I had to field at least 3,500 separate editorial challenges both from insiders and outsiders. Perhaps these odious rules do not apply to every author.

I cannot fact-check everything in Duberman's biography. What I can do is fact-check four things about which I have personal and credible knowledge. These may be Duberman's only mistakes; or not. But they suggest a pattern of erasing the material about Andrea's life and work that does not conform to a contemporary left political line that I imagine she would have seen as hopelessly programmatic and male-centered and quite distant from her own burning concerns about women's work and lives.

1. While Duberman devotes three pages to my supposedly “nasty break” with Andrea, (pp. 123, 124, 125), one which the reader is allowed to think lasted forever—he buries his own long-lasting “nasty break” with Andrea in footnote 14, on pages 297-298. Apparently, Andrea believed that Duberman had bad-mouthed her book *Woman Hating* at Dutton even though Duberman was the very man who had brought her there. Duberman writes: “If nothing else, (Andrea’s belief) may well explain why we (Duberman and Dworkin) grew apart as friends.”

Intellectuals and political activists have fallings out with each other all the time, just as civilians do. Duberman himself, in his memoir, *The Rest of It: Hustlers, Cocaine, Depression, and Then Some 1976-1988*, describes many of his own.

In fact, according to Duberman, Andrea found no peace, no peaceable community, not in Sugarloaf Key with Barbara Deming, not in the feminist and lesbian communities in Northampton, Massachusetts, not in feminist and lesbian New York City. She routinely submitted articles that were far too long for magazines. Andrea laced into both Gloria Steinem at *Ms.* and Merle Hoffman at *On The Issues* for having to shorten her pieces. *Ms.* once caught Holy Hell for having changed a single word in Andrea’s piece. On page 190, Duberman quotes a letter that Andrea wrote to *Ms.* magazine:

*I don't want anything more to do with Ms. ever. Not ever. As a feminist courtesy, I have never made public my deep political objections to the way (Ms.)trivializes feminism ... We brought you extraordinary information ... and you turned what we gave you into shit.*

Andrea complained to me about every major feminist with whom she was in touch. She complained to me about John’s stealing

her ideas and then getting larger book advances than she could ever command. She complained to me about Kitty (Catherine MacKinnon) being better rewarded for Andrea's ideas because Kitty was blond, thin, Christian, well-spoken, wealthy, and very smart. I'm sure that Andrea complained about me as well, and not only in a letter to Leah Fritz.

For whatever reasons, Duberman has disappeared the very long and passionate relationship I had with Andrea. This is particularly odd since I had already described a small part of that relationship in 3,103 words in *A Politically Incorrect Feminist*. He was familiar both with this work and with my 2005 *The Death of Feminism*. He cites both books on page 305 in footnotes 17 and 18. Duberman could easily have challenged what I wrote; he did not. What he did, instead, was to disappear our relationship. He handled Andrea's breakup with Barbara Deming, which lasted a long time, with some compassion. In my case, my first breakup with Andrea has me looking really bad. But my relationship with Andrea did not end then and there.

But first, here's how we met. Like a number of other feminists, Andrea was a bit of a street person and she approached strangers as if they were intimates or as if they owed her something. It was a little frightening to those who had been more privileged than she had been. It was also thrilling—like having Genet or Rimbaud demand money for a meal.

Thus, in 1974, she called me quite out of the blue and did one of her "You're so great and I'm being crushed" routines which worked so well for her. Andrea had accused her publisher of "sabotaging" her book *Woman Hating*. We had yet to meet—but Andrea said that Jack Macrae of Dutton had specifically told her that if I had not endorsed her book, it could not be that good. Andrea was either planning or had already carried out a



sit-in in Macrae's office. Those were such heady times that I gave her a quote over the phone before I had even read the book. I also admonished her for believing him—and for not calling me first. And then I invited her over.

The first time Andrea met my mother was an unforgettable moment. My mother said to Andrea, who always wore denim overalls, like a farmer: "And who are you? The garbage man?"

Both Andrea and I were shocked and tried not to laugh. My mother broke the ice by declaring, "My daughter is no better than you. She doesn't dress like a professor. What is wrong with the women in your group?"

Now Andrea was shocked. "Mrs. Chesler, Phyllis is one of the most glamorous women in our movement."

Who knew that Andrea noticed such things?

Before our first "breakup," I endorsed *Woman Hating* (1974). I also spoke to people at Dutton on her behalf. I marched with Andrea outside the Times Square movie theater which was featuring the movie *Snuff*. After our first "break," I stood with her at the conference on pornography at NYU and was castigated in *The New York Times* on Christmas Day for what I said about pornography; I had compared it to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

Down the decades, Andrea continued to turn to me over and over again for help, advice, support, confirmation, funding, my signature on a letter or a petition, to read her work (always at the last minute), to ask for endorsements, and to invite me to accompany her to her lectures and have dinner afterward with her, John, and our mutual agent, Elaine Markson. We strategized responses to over-the-top misogyny, such as the

Joel Steinberg and Hedda Nussbaum atrocity, Bret Easton Ellis' novel *Psycho*, and Jennifer Levin's murder by Robert Chambers. We marched on behalf of the victims. In 1986, Andrea spoke at the custody speak-out that I organized together with Noreen Connell, then-president of NOW-NYS. In 1987-1988, Andrea supported my anti-surrogacy activism and in 1991, she introduced me to some women in Florida and North Carolina and helped me strategize my initial involvement in the Aileen Wuornos case in Florida.

In any event, our relationship lasted for about 30 years, through every kind of political weather. We frequently talked on the phone and often met for dinner. She knew my very young son. Most charmingly, both she and Kate Millett spoke to him as if he were an adult. She and John Stoltenberg attended many of my family events: birthday parties, book parties, holidays.

Quite simply, I loved her. I thought she was a force to be reckoned with, a powerful writer, perhaps a genius. Although her enemies never became my enemies (many remained my friends and allies), I still had her back. When we really parted company, I missed her.

I remember walking down Seventh Avenue in Park Slope, Brooklyn. Andrea was with John, but she stopped, smiled so sweetly, and congratulated me on my work on anti-Semitism. I thought this was particularly gallant of her since part of our final breakup had something to do with this subject. (I choose not to share the other reason involved since this would only dishonor Andrea.)

2. On page 123, Duberman writes that our mutual (literary) agent (Elaine Markson) fired me because I had accused Andrea of "plagiarism." Elaine did not "promptly tell me to find another agent." In fact, she continued to represent me. I

acknowledged her in a number of books that I published long after *Woman Hating* came out. For example, she represented me on *About Men* (1978), *With Child: A Diary of Motherhood* (1979), *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody* (1986), and *Sacred Bond: The Legacy of Baby M* (1988). One may see my acknowledgements to Elaine as my agent in each of these books. At one point, I was the jerk who left Elaine; I have regretted doing so ever since. Elaine and I were so close that when an apartment became available in her building near Washington Square Park, she asked me whether I would be interested in it.

Why did Duberman publish something that is simply not true? Why did he not fact-check this with me?

3. Why would Duberman also disappear Andrea's relationship with Merle Hoffman who both published and funded her work? For example, Duberman merely notes that "someone suggested that the Diana Foundation in California might be receptive" to giving Andrea a much yearned-for grant (page 254). That someone was me and, by the way, the Diana Foundation was based in New York, not California, and had been founded by Merle. Duberman writes: "Miraculously, the Diana Foundation decided to award Andrea a \$5,000 grant. It was a huge relief."

Who or what led Duberman to obscure Andrea's relationship to Merle and to *On The Issues* magazine? Merle is the very woman whom I persuaded to hire John Stoltenberg as her managing editor. He worked there. Merle also funded and accompanied Andrea down to Washington, D.C., to interview Congressman John Lewis and she published that [interview](#) (1994). Merle published [Andrea's work](#) (1995). I published my review of *Mercy* there.

Through the Diana Foundation, Merle also funded Andrea's

research on Judaism, the Holocaust, and Israel. I arranged for Andrea to accompany me to feminist Israel.

4. Duberman claims that Andrea had disliked Jan Raymond's prescient book [The Transsexual Empire](#) (1979; Second Edition, 1994); that she had viewed the book as "transphobic" and had told Jan so (p. 161; p. 309, footnote 12). In this same footnote, Duberman quotes John Stoltenberg for having defended Andrea against the charge of "transphobia." John wrote this long after Andrea died. His piece is cited in a footnote that one cannot access—but it can be found online at the *Boston Review*, dated April 6, 2020. Titled [Andrea Dworkin was a Trans Ally](#), John writes:

*After Andrea's death I became increasingly concerned that she and the radical politics I learned from her were being misappropriated by some to argue—in the name of radical feminism—for a biologically essentialist notion of "real womanhood."*

Duberman writes that Andrea also herself "deplored" (p. 161) Raymond's analysis. He quotes from a letter that Andrea wrote to Jan, but which likely also appeared in her 1974 book *Woman Hating*. Andrea wrote:

*I know of transsexuals in Europe as a small, vigorously persecuted minority, without any recourse to civil or political protection. They lived in absolute exile, as far as I could see, conjuring up for me the deepest reaches of Jewish experience. They were driven by their ostracization to prostitution, drugs, and suicide, conjuring up for me the deepest reaches of female experience ... I perceived their suffering as authentic. Male-to-female transsexuals were in rebellion against the phallus and so was I. Female-to-male transsexuals were seeking a freedom only possible to males in*

*patriarchy, and so was I ... every transsexual is entitled to a sex-change operation, and it should be provided by the community as one of its functions.*

Thus Spake the Young Andrea.

Yet this letter/passage in *Woman Hating* was written a long time ago, long before transgender men became something of an aggressive men's rights cult; before billionaires, surgeons, pharmaceutical companies, and mental health professionals saw Big Business in [diagnosing and treating gender dysphoria](#) (Bilek, 2018); long before transgender men began to [harass](#) (Hamm, 2019) and [deplatform](#) radical feminists (whom they denigrated as Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists or TERFS), and before their demand to [compete](#) (Aschwanden, 2019) against biological females in [sports](#).

It seems that both Duberman and Stoltenberg want to enlist Andrea's ghost into supporting the contemporary transgender movement. To do so, they are using her work of 46 years ago to conflate Dworkin's concept of a small, persecuted, and powerless minority of transsexual prostitutes in Europe with our contemporary, aggressive, well-funded transgender movement.

For the purpose of this review, I contacted Jan Raymond—who told me that as she was writing *The Transsexual Empire*, that Andrea “read the manuscript in process and contributed an endorsement.” Andrea's endorsement for *The Transsexual Empire* read as follows:

*Janice Raymond's The Transsexual Empire is challenging, rigorous, and pioneering. Raymond scrutinizes the connections between science, morality, and gender. She asks the hard*

*questions and her answers have an intellectual quality and ethical integrity so rare, so important, that the reader wants to think, to enter into a critical dialogue with the book.*

This does not sound like someone who “deplored” this work.

Might Andrea have been ambivalent, undecided, or have changed her thinking on this issue over the next 46 years? Surely, as with Andrea’s friendships. Duberman could have remained honest rather than bending history to suit contemporary fads and dictates. Perhaps Andrea did idealize the concept of gender-busting and saw it as a way out of patriarchy, even out of biology, but this was merely an enticing “idea,” similar to Shulie Firestone’s hope that babies could be born in test tubes and might thus serve as woman’s way out of both patriarchy and biology. More to the point, Andrea’s bright, blazing focus was always on woman-centered realities such as rape, incest, sexual harassment, battering, child abuse, pornography, prostitution, and female homelessness and poverty. Her work consistently mirrored that focus.

To some extent, Duberman’s Andrea is really John Stoltenberg’s Andrea—or, in fact, is sometimes John Stoltenberg himself. Perhaps John is trans-channeling Andrea; perhaps Duberman is being led down the garden path by John. I am surprised that Duberman followed right along. He is better than that.

As for Andrea—we will not see her like soon again. Rainer Maria Rilke, in his *Letters to a Young Poet (1929/1993)*, wrote: “Dear Sir: I cannot give you any advice but this ... if, as I have said, one feels one could live without writing, then one shouldn’t write at all.”

Andrea could not live without writing, she was born to write, she wrote all the time, and she has left us an incredible legacy.

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