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***Alta and the History of
Shameless Hussy Press, 1969-1989***

Interviewed by Irene Reti
Edited by Irene Reti and Randall Jarrell
Santa Cruz, California
2001

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Founding Shameless Hussy Press 7

Pat Parker 12

Mitsuye Yamada 13

The Challenges of Book Distribution 15

Relationships with other Alternative Presses 16

Early Second-Wave Feminism 23

Ntozake Shange 26

George Sand's: *The Haunted Pool* 30

Book Printers 31

Letters to Women 33

Deluged with Dudes 35

The End of Shameless Hussy Press 38

Motherhood as an Institution 40

The Shameless Hussy T-Shirt 42

Leap, Leap: The Shameless Hussy Logo 44

Writing 45

Musical Influences 47

A Woman Who Burns Away Masks 55

Opening Pandora's Box 58

Appendix: Chronological List of Shameless Hussy Press Publications

Index 69

Introduction

Feminist presses emerged in the late 1960s as a result of technological improvements in offset printing, a legacy of leftist radical newspaper, pamphlet, and book publishing, and early second-wave feminist politics. A network of feminist bookstores, printers, and publishers brought poetry, fiction, political pamphlets, and anthologies to a women's movement hungry for writings about their lives and experiences. What this early movement lacked in formal distribution, it made up for in spirit. Women carted their books across the country to their friends, who in turn, sold or gave them to other friends. Feminism as a movement became identified with publishing.

Alta, a feminist poet, founded Shameless Hussy Press in Oakland, California in 1969. Shameless Hussy Press was the first feminist press in the United States. The Regional History Project conducted these two 90-minute interviews with Alta in August, 2000 and February, 2001, documenting her visionary and pioneering work as a feminist publisher, as well as her literary career as a poet. Alta's daughter, Lorelei, also participated in the first interview.

Shameless Hussy Press is one of three presses archived in the Special Collections department of UC Santa Cruz's University Library, as part of the UC/Stanford US History and Women's Studies Consortium California Feminist Presses Project. The project is designed to preserve the output as well as the history of feminist presses in California. The other two presses collected are Papier-Mache Press and HerBooks.

My experience as the publisher of HerBooks provided a unique vantage point from which to conduct this oral history with Alta of Shameless Hussy Press. HerBooks was established in 1984, only fifteen years after Shameless Hussy Press, but by the mid-1980s the climate for both feminism and small press book distribution was dramatically different. Several alternative book distributors, among them the Berkeley-based Bookpeople, and Inland Book Company, based on the East Coast, provided excellent and convenient book distribution to a flourishing network of independent, feminist, gay and lesbian bookstores. Feminist newspapers, magazines, and journals were thriving, their pages filled with reviews of books by emerging feminist writers. By the late-1980s, over twenty feminist presses, as well as a number of gay presses were actively publishing.

This is the first of three oral history volumes focusing on the history of the three feminist presses collected at McHenry Library. They form an interesting triptych. Shameless Hussy Press represents well the climate for feminist publishing in the late 1960s and 1970s, (although Alta continued to publish books until 1989), and its historical antecedents in the leftist movements of the 1960s. HerBooks is characteristic of small, grassroots, lesbian feminist presses to follow in the footsteps of these first pioneers, into a heady and vibrant feminist movement, and also to benefit from the technological era of desktop publishing and digital printing. Papier-Mache Press, also founded in 1984, is best known for the anthology, *When I Am an Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple*, which has been reprinted over 44 times, with 1.4 million copies in print. Papier-Mache was a feminist press, but one with a more mainstream appeal to readers in the 1990s. It achieved widespread distribution of its titles in bookstores, airports, and gift outlets throughout the United States, but finally succumbed to the economic turmoil in the book industry of the late 1990s.

Alta was born in 1942 in Reno, Nevada where her parents owned a piano store. When she was twelve, her family moved to Berkeley so that her brother could attend the California School for the Blind. She attended Castro Valley High School, and then UC Berkeley in the early 1960s. She left UC Berkeley to teach school in Virginia, where civil rights movement protests over segregation had led to the closure of the public schools. White people had set up private schools for their children, and Alta was part of the civil rights movement's project to set up schools for black students. In a 1976 interview with Jennifer Stone, Alta said about this experience, "Obviously they didn't need some white chick from California. I found out my job was to fight racism in my own community among whites."¹

Returning to California, Alta, like many women at that time, began to question the institution of marriage. The experience of women's isolation in suburban marriage became one of the primary topics she explored in her writing.

¹. Jennifer Stone, "Alta: Shameless Hussy," *City Miner*, (Fall/Winter 1976): 10-11, 42-45.

In 1970, her second marriage, to poet John Oliver Simon, ended in divorce. Alta moved back to Oakland, where she organized a commune that provided refuge for women escaping abusive marriages. It was there that she began Shameless Hussy Press. Like most feminist and leftist presses of the 1960s and 1970s, Shameless Hussy Press was a shoestring operation while Alta, a single mother, struggled on welfare for years.

Alta began her press by publishing a small anthology of women's writing entitled *Remember our Fire*, which she printed on her AB Dick 360 small offset press at her house. She continued to print her books herself for many years. *Remember Our Fire* was inspired by the first women's poetry readings in the Bay Area. In her narrative she says, "I read everything I could get my hands on by women writers, and I could only find ten poems about being a woman, so I used them all."

Within a few years all of this was to change, as the burgeoning second wave of the feminism sparked both a vibrant poetry scene, and the founding of several other feminist presses. Diana Press, in Baltimore, Maryland, Daughters Inc., established in Plainfield, Vermont, and the Women's Press Collective in Oakland played key roles in the development of early women's liberation.

One of the most important historical contributions of Shameless Hussy Press was the first publication of books by four women who later became prominent feminist writers: Pat Parker, Mitsuye Yamada, Ntozake Shange, and Susan Griffin.

Pat Parker (born 1944) was one of the first black lesbian feminist writers in the United States. In her narrative, Alta says of Pat Parker, "To be a lesbian was a phenomenal thing. To be a publicly announced black lesbian—she was probably the only one in the whole United States, or in the world." Parker was a founder of the women's health movement. She also founded the Women's Press Collective, and was the author of five collections of poetry. Her first book, *Child of Myself*, was published by Shameless Hussy Press in 1971. Pat Parker died of breast cancer in 1989.

Japanese-American poet, Mitsuye Yamada, was born in 1923 and lived in Seattle, Washington, until she and her family were interned at a relocation camp in Idaho. Her groundbreaking book, *Camp Notes and Other Poems*, published by Shameless Hussy Press in 1976, was, as Alta explains, "the first book since 1947 that had been published by a Japanese-American about her experiences in the camps. There had been two books

published in the 1940s, and they had both gone out of print.” Yamada later published *Desert Run: Poems and Stories*, and founded the Multicultural Women Writers of Orange County. She is a professor of writing at UC Irvine.

Shameless Hussy Press was also the first to publish Ntozake’s Shange’s poem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, which was later adapted into an Obie award-winning Broadway theater production. *The New Yorker* praised *For Colored Girls* for, “encompassing every feeling and experience a woman has ever had.” Ntozake Shange was born Paulette Williams in Trenton, New Jersey in 1948. In the early 1970s she moved to California, and became part of the Bay Area feminist and literary scene. In 1971 she took the name Ntozake Shange, which means “she who comes with her own things,” and “she who walks like a lion.”

Susan Griffin is one of the most influential American feminist writers of the 20th century. In the 1960s she was active in the Free Speech, civil rights, and anti-war movements in Berkeley. Griffin’s feminist politics were inspired by her experience as a single mother in the 1970s. Her books, *Rape: the Power of Consciousness, Women and Nature*, and *Pornography and Silence* are part of the feminist canon. But it was Alta, who knew “Susie” Griffin through a women’s group in Berkeley, who recognized Griffin’s gifts, and brought out her first books, *The Sink* and *dear sky*. “Susie and I found each other in her kitchen,” says Alta.

In her narrative, Alta also describes how she came to bring back into print George Sand’s *The Haunted Pool*, which had been out of print for eighty years. Other authors published by Shameless Hussy Press include Lyn Lifshin, Judith Arcana, Barbara Noda, Jess Wells, and John Oliver Simon, and a volume of Calamity Jane’s letters to her daughter. Alta also published a series of children’s books, as well as three volumes of her own poetry. In all, Shameless Hussy Press published over fifty titles before it closed in 1989.²

In this oral history, Alta also discusses her growth as an a writer—from her early life in Reno, where her family owned a piano store, and she grew up with half a dozen

². See Appendix A for a list of Shameless Hussy publications.

pianos in her bedroom, to her years as a feminist poet in the heady days of the early women's liberation movement in the San Francisco Bay Area. She assesses her place in American poetry, "I opened Pandora's box. There were lots of things that women had never talked about. I just started writing about them."

Alta's poetry was part of a genre of narrative, free verse poetry which emerged in the 1960s, and broke with classical poetic form, instead prioritizing accessibility and emotional impact. It provided a powerful vehicle for feminists to write about women's experiences of what was formerly considered purely personal and unspeakable. Some of these topics were the female body, domestic violence, rape, and lesbian sexuality.

In her foreword to Alta's book, *i am not a practicing angel* Marge Piercy wrote about Alta's poetry:³

She doesn't say more—or less—than she means. Her poems drop into your mind like stones and set up vibrations. Not angelic or demonic, not grand or overinflated, not studious or poesy, what she writes is as human and daily and nourishing as good soup. She has a salty sense of humor. Poems of the kitchen, the bedroom, and the street, and of herself as a character caught and speaking.

Alta's poetry has often been described as emotional, even shocking. In her essay, "The Feminist Poet: Alta and Adrienne Rich," Suzanne Juhasz described the impact of Alta's poetry.⁴ "This kind of poem usually does not use the imaginative transformations of figurative language. Rather, it calls on the impact of the literal detail to fly directly like an arrow, to couch feeling to feeling."

This manuscript was transcribed verbatim and returned to Alta for additions and corrections. She checked the manuscript carefully, and kindly lent us the photograph for the frontispiece reproduced here. I wish to thank Jacquelyn Marie, Women's Studies Librarian at McHenry Library, who initiated the California Feminist Presses Project, and

³ Marge Piercy, "Foreword," *I Am Not a Practicing Angel: poems by alta* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press) 1975.

⁴ Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms, Modern Poetry by Women: A New Tradition*, (New York: Harper and Row) 1976.

the collection of Shameless Hussy Press's archive; the staff of Special Collections for facilitating access to the Shameless Hussy Archive; and Randall Jarrell, Director of the Regional History Project, for her support of this project.

Shameless Hussy Press is the subject of a finding aid created by the Online Archive of California unit of McHenry Library. This finding aid can be viewed at <http://library/oac/findaid/index.htm>. A chronological list of Shameless Hussy Press publications extracted from this finding aid is reproduced in the appendix of this volume.

Copies of the manuscript are on deposit in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; and in Special Collections at McHenry Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The Project is supported administratively by Christine Bunting, head of Collection Planning, and University Librarian, Allan J. Dyson.

—*Irene Reti*

May, 2001

Regional History Project

McHenry Library

University of California, Santa Cruz

Founding Shameless Hussy Press

Reti: Why don't we start with talking about how you started a feminist press.

Alta: If Lorelei and I disagree, I want the disagreement on tape, because most times when you hear a history, it's one person;¹ there're no questions or disagreement. That's not how life is, and it's not how history should be.

I couldn't get published except by my ex-husband. Susie [Susan] Griffin couldn't get published. I knew she was a great poet. Pat Parker couldn't get published and I knew she was a great poet. I'd lived with John Oliver Simon for three years and I saw him publish and print his own books. He had taught me how to print. When I realized that all you had to do was put paper in a printing press and have it come out and fold it, and call it something . . . if you did that for eight pieces of paper, folded them, and called it something, it was a book. So I learned how to make a book. I had been reading Anais Nin's diaries, and I knew that she and Henry Miller had made books on a letterpress. When I found out that the only person who would publish me was my ex-husband, and no one would publish Susie, and no one would publish Pat, I thought, I think I can do this.

¹Lorelei, Alta's daughter, participated in this interview.

I was working with a woman who knew how to print but we weren't very aware of safety issues. She had long hair, and her long hair got caught in the press. She had to drop out very early, which was just as well because she had insisted on calling the press, Sisters in Struggle, which would have been SIS Press, which is cute. But once she was gone, I could revert to the name I really wanted to have, Shameless Hussy, which she vetoed. So that's how I got the name.

Reti: You were in the early feminist writing community? Can you create a picture for me of what was happening at the time?

Alta: I wouldn't say there was a writing community yet. Women's meetings were happening around the country. They were called small group meetings. One of my neighbors had one; a woman named Leonore invited six of us over for dinner one night; and another woman named Marilyn invited a few people over for afternoon tea. We started reading that there were women's groups getting together and we realized that's what we'd been doing at Susan Griffin's house. There was her and Ruth Rosen, who later became a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, and myself, and one other woman named Marilyn. So our small women's group was really a hot deal, because Ruth and Susie and I have all become renowned writers.

That was as close to a supported women's thing as could be. The first book that I printed was an anthology of women's poetry. I read everything I could get my hands on by women writers, and I could only find ten poems about being a woman, so I used them all. I called it *Remember Our Fire*. I printed that and had a celebratory reading, and no one would come. Women in the anthology wouldn't come. Diane Di Prima said, oh you just want to make women go to work in factories. I said, no one wants to work in factories. What are you talking about? But that was her view of feminism. And Julia Vinograd said, oh it's just a bunch of women reading. I don't want to show up for that. The other women were out of town. Two of the artists lived in town and they said they didn't have any interest in women's poetry so they wouldn't show up. So I had the first women's poetry reading known to history and I was the only poet willing to show up.

Reti: But people showed up to listen?

Alta: Well Judy Grahn, bless her heart, showed up. She was doing an anthology. She had just written *Edward the Dyke*. She showed up and asked me for poems for her anthology. She and I had a big fight about that anthology because when she published the poems she didn't put the names of the poets with the poems.

Reti: Why was that?

Alta: She felt it was politically incorrect, that we were not individuals. I insisted that my poem have my name and she said okay, I'll list all the names in the back. So the poems are published without names and then on the back page there're a bunch of names. Good luck finding out which poet wrote which poem, but at least the names are all listed in the anthology. To say there was a supportive women's writing community in 1969 is not quite accurate.

Reti: There you were with your one title. What did you do with it?

Alta: Well since I'd only published 250 copies we didn't have to worry about mass marketing. (laughter) I published *Remember Our Fire* and then when Simon published my book, *Freedom's in Sight* he printed 250 copies of that. I shleppe them around to bookstores. Well of course bookstores didn't want it anymore than anybody else wanted it! Pat Cody took both of them for Cody's Bookstore, because her child was in the same nursery school that Lorelei was in, and that was the only way we got in Cody's Books. There was another bookstore called Up Haste, just off Telegraph, which no longer exists. It was an absolutely break-through bookstore because half of the books were by women. No one had ever heard of such a thing. They were trying to fill their shelves and they didn't have much to work with, so they were delighted when I came in with both an anthology with ten whole poems, and my little book. So we were in Up Haste

Bookstore and Cody's Bookstore, and a miracle happened. We sold out in six months.

Reti: Wow! That's fabulous!

Alta: My book went into reprint. Everyone was saying, what? This little bent over, yellow, stapled thing went into reprint? *Remember Our Fire* sold out and I thought well, it's an anthology, I can do another one. I don't have to do the same one. For the next one I found thirty poems, because women had started writing. I had more poems and people were saying, hey, I've got this poem, and they would hand me their work. All the poems that had been lying in drawers began showing up.

Lorelei: Mom has always had an uncanny knack for sniffing out talent. Everywhere she goes she stumbles into some totally undiscovered, brilliant artistic talent. You found Susan Griffin and Pat Parker and Ntozake Shange.

Reti: Let's talk more about that. How did you find them?

Alta: Well Susie and I were in the same women's group. That's how I "found" Susie. Susie and I found each other in her kitchen.

Pat Parker

Pat Parker had actually known my husband, John Oliver Simon, who first published me. John wanted to start a literary magazine and he wanted not just rich white guys in it, so he asked Pat to be one of the editors. Pat was a black lesbian, which was a big deal at that time. To be a lesbian was a phenomenal thing. To be a publicly announced black lesbian—she was probably the only one in the whole United States, or in the world. So he asked her to be an editor, and she was just coming out. She was still married to a renowned black playwright, but left him. She used to go hang out at the porno shows late at night, as a way to relax, along with another very famous white male publisher who is probably still alive. They used to see each other in the same porno theaters in downtown Oakland. They were both poets. He asked her one day, “What are you doing here?” And she said, “What are you doing here?” He said, “Well, I like to watch naked women.” She said, “Well, so do I!” She came over to my house and said, Alta, I think there’s a reason I like to watch naked women. I said, yeah, what’s that? She said, I think I like women. I said, well a lot of us like to watch naked women, Pat. She said, no, I mean I really like to watch naked women! (laughter) So a few months later she wrote a poem about it, brought it to me, and said, Alta, I think I’m a dyke! Do you know any? I said, well Judy Grahn is writing a book called *Edward the Dyke*. She said, who’s Judy Grahn?

Reti: Oh!

Alta: Then that whole connection got made. Pat discovered the gay bars. She kept calling me up and saying, hey I found this place called Maude's! It's all full of women. There was a reading in the early 1970s, I think, in Glide Memorial Church—Pat Parker, Susie Griffin, Judy Grahn and me. We were like the Big Four. There was this reading. Pat was the third poet, and the third poet always is the biggest hit. Pat brought the house down. Then I got up there. I've never felt this way at any other reading before or since. I thought, no one's going to hear a word I say, and they didn't. It was such a breakthrough to have Pat Parker say what she said. She said it all.

Reti: She was very important to me by the time I came out in the late 1970s.

Alta: That's nice to hear. I'm proud of that.

Mitsuye Yamada

Reti: What about Mitsuye Yamada?

Alta: Oh, Mitsuye. That's another really, really big deal, which we had no idea was such a . . . You hear famous people say gee, I didn't know it was such a big deal when I . . . But we really didn't know!

Mitsuye Yamada, who lives in Southern California, had put together a magazine called *Noon*. She teaches writing at UC Irvine. She asked me if I'd

come do a reading. Angel, my husband at the time, and I went down and stayed at her beautiful home. She and her husband Yosh were wonderful hosts. Angel and Yosh hit it off and Mitsuye and I hit it off. The third day we were there she said something about her poems. Angel said, can I see them? So he stayed up that night. There were only a dozen poems, but he stayed up for hours, pouring over those poems, and before we went to bed he said I think we should publish this book. By this time I'd published books with 28 pages! (laughter) I said, only twelve poems? He said, "Buns, I think we should publish this book." So the next morning he said that to Mitsuye. She said well there are only a dozen poems, and he said, well, why don't you write some more?

So she wrote some more and we published a 28-page book. After Mitsuye Yamada's *Camp Notes* came out we learned that it was the first book since 1947 that had been published by a Japanese-American about her experiences in the camps. There had been two books published in the 1940s, and they had both gone out of print.

Reti: So you were really pioneering in that.

Alta: It was another drawer that got opened, because then various other Japanese-Americans started writing.

Reti: How did you reach the Japanese-American community?

Alta: Well, by this time there were four bookstores that carried our stuff. There was Up Haste Books, Cody's, Gotham's Bookmart in New York, and Modern Times bookstore in San Francisco. When Pat's book came out she hardly knew any dykes but the books just sold like that. People found the books.

Lorelei: The books found the dykes.

Reti: They have legs.

Alta: (laughter)

Lorelei: (laughter) The books or the dykes?

Reti: I was thinking about the books.

Alta: Also a guy named Bob Yamada worked at the co-op in Berkeley and taught literature at Cal. He found Mitsuye's book. Once a professor picks it up it's such a breakthrough.

The Challenges of Book Distribution

Reti: At this point in time there were no small press distribution companies, right?

Alta: Well there weren't any in existence for probably the first six years. The way Shameless Hussy books got distributed was my friend Alma

Cremonesi. Alma would go around to women's conferences and carry a box of books. I would go to the American Library Association conference, that was Angel's idea, and the American Booksellers Association conference. They didn't know what to do with us. They stuck us at card tables in some back room. By 1974 there were about ten of us at card tables in the back room, so we weren't totally by ourselves anymore. I remember at a conference in San Francisco, there were twelve of us at card tables in the back room, and all the big publishers in the regular room, but we were next to the bathroom, so we started getting traffic. After that I would always ask for the table next to the bathroom. That was the first time we saw anything that looked major to us also at a card table. We saw *Harper's Magazine* also at a card table. We said what is happening? That was a real turning point. Because before, it was things people had never heard of. Some of us didn't last very long, but quite a few of us kept going.

Reti: When you say us, who are you talking about?

Alta: Small presses.

Relationships with other Alternative Presses

Reti: Can you remember some of the other small presses who were there?

Alta: Crossing Press, which is now a mid-sized press here in California, was from Ithaca and Trumansburg, New York. Len Fulton's magazine and

anthology of small presses—Dustbooks. Tree Farm Press. Coffee House Press, which is still going and gets tremendous awards now.

Reti: So were you all connected outside of these book shows?

Alta: No, we never saw each other. Len Fulton lived in Paradise, California, and he wanted Simon and me to come up and visit, so we did a couple of times. Crossing Press wrote to me around 1974 and asked if I had a manuscript that they could look at, so I sent them the manuscript of *I am Not a Practicing Angel*. That's about it for contact.

Judy Grahn started a press. But there were troubles there. She started a press called The Women's Press Collective. Well, first she took Pat Parker. I had published Pat Parker. What do you mean you're publishing Pat Parker? That's the book I published! So I quit speaking to her and I quit speaking to Pat. There were plenty of women writers. I'd only published ten books. Then Susie Griffin called me a few months later and she said, Alta, they're trying to do it to me. Judy wants to publish my book that you published. I said, oh for God's sake. She said, you've got to go talk to her. This is crazy.

Reti: Why not cultivate new writers?

Alta: Exactly! She did some. There was Willyce Kim, and she published herself. So Angel and I went over there one night and we said, cut the crap.

Don't do this anymore! She stopped. That was the last problem we had with her publishing our people.

Reti: What about Diana Press? Was that around then?

Alta: It was, and it got destroyed. When I say I got death threats I'm not kidding. People threatened to destroy my press, my physical AB Dick 360 offset press. I had to move to the suburbs and get a post office box and an unlisted phone number, because the kind of people who were making the threats were terrified of the suburbs. They're scared to go out there. My neighbors were rednecks with guns. I told my redneck neighbors with guns, this is what I'm up against. People have been making threats against my publishing company and against my press. And my neighbors with guns would just stick their fingers in their belt loops and say, let us know if they show up.

Reti: So that's why you moved to San Lorenzo?

Alta: That's why I moved to San Lorenzo. Diana Press went ahead and stayed in Oakland. They had also their own printing press and they actually had a workshop. They had the whole outfit, everything they needed to print books. They kept their books in the same room as the printing press. And it got destroyed.

Lorelei: Destroyed how?

Alta: People went in and broke all the machinery and burned the books.

Lorelei: Who was doing this?

Alta: It wasn't the rednecks in the suburbs doing it. There are various theories on who was doing it. One of the theories was FBI agitators. But we have no way of knowing. Evidence came out two or two and a half years later that it was all women who destroyed Diana Press. It was women who were threatening me.

Lorelei: I guess a lot of women were threatened by the movement to change.

Reti: This was a feminist press we're talking about here, and that was a very threatening thing. It still is. But especially at that time, I can imagine that . . .

Alta: I took the death threats very seriously. I took the threats against my press very seriously. I didn't think that moving away in terms of miles would be so effective as moving to a milieu where those people wouldn't show up. I called San Lorenzo my briar patch. You know the story of the rabbit who says, don't throw me in the briar patch. Don't throw me in the briar patch! And he's completely safe inside the briar patch. Simon's press wasn't threatened.

Reti: He had a press also?

Alta: He had the printing press before I had it. I got it and when I started bringing out books that's when I started getting threats.

Lorelei: It was a magazine called *The Aldebaran Review*.

Reti: You were a working class woman trying to run this press. I know you can do shoestring stuff, but I'm trying to get a picture of how you managed.

Alta: Well my husband had a job. All my husbands had jobs. I've never supported a man. Angel worked as a minimum wage gas station attendant. But my parents had bought the house in San Lorenzo back when house payments were really cheap. House payments were about \$200 a month, so even though Angel was making minimum wage we were able to make the house payments and buy food. To get money for the books I would go to my friends, who were mostly Berkeley liberals, and say, I want to bring out another book. If you buy it now, you will get one of the first copies. I'd sell them a book for a dollar. When I'd sold enough books ahead of time to raise enough money to buy paper, I'd buy twenty bucks worth of paper and make a book.

Lorelei: And ink. You needed ink.

Alta: Ink lasted forever. I only had to buy that every five years.

Lorelei: And those metal plates that you wrapped around the rollers on the press.

Reti: And the chemicals, offset chemicals.

Alta: I was only doing three or four books a year and they were only 28 pages. I didn't need a lot of that stuff.

Reti: So you were physically doing the printing.

Alta: I physically printed the books, collated the books, and stapled them. Then I physically shlepped them around. I didn't have a driver's license at the time. I physically took them in boxes on the bus, to the two bookstores.

Lorelei: Big old cardboard boxes.

Alta: Alma Cremenese physically shlepped the books around in boxes to the women's meetings. That's how we sold our books until 1974, when we got reviewed in a big old catalog of women's groups and businesses. Shameless Hussy Press was right in there. It came out of the Bowery in New York by two women who were doing it like I was doing it, doing everything themselves. Just about that time I published Ntozake Shange and George Sand. George Sand had been out of print for eighty years. By

now there were things called women's bookstores. There were maybe ten or twelve in the whole country, and they all ordered Shameless Hussy books.

Reti: This would have been the mid-1970s. That would have made a huge difference.

Alta: Yes.

Lorelei: People used to ask me, how does it feel to have a famous mother? I never knew what to say about that. It was just my life.

Alta: It's funny how famous some of the authors got. Susan Griffin got really famous.

Reti: Did you have a sense at the time of how incredible it was that you were doing this?

Alta: I had a sense that Berkeley in the 1960s was incredible. I would tell my friends, Berkeley in the 1960s is going to seem like Paris in the 1920s. It's still, thank God, different than almost anywhere else. But in the 1960s—there wasn't anywhere else anything like it. Nothing like it! People's Park. We started the ecology movement, with one whole block that UC Berkeley wanted to take over. We said, "Hold it. It's time to plant some trees."

Early Second-Wave Feminism

Reti: What about in terms of feminism? You were there at the creation of the second wave of feminism. You started the first feminist press in the world.

Alta: Well actually there was one in France that started three months before mine. She and I duked it out at an international women's publishing conference. I walked up to her and said, you were not the first! She stood up and said, well you were not the first! I said, I started my press in 1969. She said, what month? I started mine in April. I said, 1969? Wow, you really are the first. So we shook hands and made peace. Some woman in France started the first and I was the second. So I say I started the first American feminist press.

Reti: So there you were. Did you feel this second wave of feminism coming?

Alta: Well I was dodging the bullets, getting kicked out of everything, getting death threats and getting kicked out of groups. I was kicked out of women's groups. I started a halfway house for women and they kicked me out. I said you can't kick me out. I started this thing! I kick you out! I came home one day and my phone had been disconnected. I went in the fridge to get food and they'd stuck pennies in my mayonnaise. I was trying to raise kids in that house.

Lorelei: I never liked that house. They put all the kids in one room.

Reti: What was happening? What were the issues? You know it's very easy, looking back, to be romantic about the early women's movement. This does not sound romantic.

Alta: That's interesting. What's your vision of the early women's movement? What did you think it was like?

Reti: I thought it had this kind of pureness of fervor and feminist purpose. I started publishing HerBooks Feminist Press in 1984. I came out as a lesbian in 1979. My mother was a feminist in the early 1970s. I was a kid when my mom was having her consciousness raising groups in the living room. I was around for that stuff but I was a kid. My picture of it was of this tremendous energy. By the time I came along and started publishing, that was already starting to fade. People were starting to say feminism is dead, or feminism is passé. It's easy for me to be romantic about the early women's movement, but I wasn't an adult feminist involved in these battles. I was witness later to many schisms, and of course falling-outs with various women who have worked with me on the press. It's hard to work with people.

Alta: I did feel that women writers were creating a wonderful warm quilt for women. I felt that Susie (no longer Pat because she trotted off to Judy

Grahn) and Mitsuye, Ntozake and I were trying to create a warm quilt for women. When we went to New York and saw the New York writers scene I couldn't wait to get back to California and the feminist writers, because the New York writer's scene is really cutthroat. There were enough of them out there and the pie looked small and they all wanted the biggest piece.

Reti: Are you talking about women now?

Alta: The whole writing scene, but there were a couple of women writers back there who got caught up in that. It really was not like that on the West Coast. There were few enough of us and the pie looked enormous enough that we'd never even get to it. We tended to be much more supportive and involved with one another, and excited when we each published a book. I went back to New York and they were saying well so-and-so got that big award, and I don't think so-and-so deserved it. Well we weren't getting awards. We didn't have to say things like that. We were lucky to have our books in four bookstores instead of two bookstores. New York was a nasty scene to me.

Lorelei: Also, wasn't part of the whole philosophy of the small group meetings about women creating a safe place for women to talk?

Alta: That's right.

Lorelei: That men didn't understand, but women would be nurturing to each other in these groups. Some of that bled over into the women's writing movement, even if there were exceptions.

Alta: Yes.

Reti: What did feminism mean to you?

Alta: Jennifer Stone asked me that in an interview² and I said it's when you go to women for support and when you give your love to women. I've thought about it. I think that's still true.

Ntozake Shange

Reti: Tell me about Ntozake Shange.

Alta: There was a year, I think it was 1976, when I went to a poetry reading every single night. I can't stand them anymore. A wonderful professor at Sonoma State, J.J. Wilson, put together a reading series at the San Francisco Public Library. I really wanted people to come to my stuff so I better go to theirs. So I went to the whole series. One night Pat Parker, and me and probably Susie were doing the reading. Pat didn't show up. So it was the other poet and me. Now in poetry this is not all that unusual. But it was unusual for Pat, so we were concerned. By the time Pat arrived there were

²Jennifer Stone, "alta: shameless hussy," *City Miner*, Vol 1. no. 3 November 1976, p. 11.

only 15 minutes left to go, so she had a very short reading. She had stayed home to watch Billie Jean King! It was a very big deal at that time for Billie Jean King to beat a man. Women's sports made a turnaround right at that point.

Reti: I guess you couldn't tape it in those days.

Alta: Yeah, and she was willing to make us sit there and miss that tennis match! That's another thing I never forgave Pat for.

So I went to this series of readings, and one night there was this young woman reading something that just knocked me out. Her name was Thulani Davis. So I went up afterwards and I asked her for it. I gave her a card for Shameless Hussy Press and she said oh, I have a sister who writes. I was reluctant to give her the card, too, because I hadn't heard her sister. But I said okay. Thulani Davis never sent me a manuscript but her sister did. Angel had opened her sister's manuscript and then stuck it back in the envelope and was about to mail it back when I said, "I haven't seen this one." He said, oh it's terrible. Forget it. I said, no, I like to read everything. He said, Well, skip that one. It's really bad. I looked at it. It was *Sassafrass*. I called Ntozake Shange and said I like what you sent me. She said I just wrote something else I like better. Let me send you that. She sent *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. I was just stunned. I kept re-reading it and re-reading it. I had the same reaction

to it as Angel did to Mitsuye's *Camp Notes*. Now why did Angel, who liked *Ulysses*, not like *Sassafrass*?

She said, I'd like you to publish *For Colored Girls* first. I didn't understand the push but I wanted to publish both of them, so I did. Then she was on Broadway with it!

Lorelei: Well before she was on Broadway I remember she used to give readings and she would have a musician playing a horn and someone dancing at the readings. Whose idea was that?

Alta: Hers. Paula Moss was the choreographer. The musicians were various people. I made a videotape of it at this little cable station in Hayward. Then I turned it into a movie. That's Ntozake and Paula Moss dancing. The one in New York she didn't dance in.

Lorelei: Originally it wasn't staged with different women reading different pieces. It was just Ntozake reading the poetry and someone behind her dancing.

Reti: Then she wrote it as a play?

Alta: No, they were poems. Then some guy back in New York said this could work as a theater piece. Would you be willing to make some adjustments? I went back and saw it opening night. I was talking to a

friend and I said, gee it's too bad I can't go back. I can't afford it. She said fuck that, Alta, just go! So I did. What are credit cards for? Tillie Olson gave me \$50 for the trip, and that's the only money I had! I went to New York with \$50.

Lorelei: It was on Broadway forever. I ran into a magazine article in something like *Time*, about how it had been on Broadway for so long and it was such a success.

Reti: Did that bring a lot more money and recognition to Shameless Hussy Press?

Alta: No. Because then it got published by a big press. I got a \$1000 for it.

Reti: That was it. They paid you off. Did you get credit as the original publisher?

Alta: I hope so, but it was so painful I don't think I ever looked.

Reti: That mainstreaming often happens.

Lorelei: Well, I remember a lot of times when you encouraged people you'd published to go to the big presses, because they'd made it and you wanted to publish other people who were up and coming. But there were times when it hurt your feelings and there was bad blood.

Alta: That's true. Whenever a person had a chance to go mainstream I would always say yes. If a manuscript were in production with me and they had a chance to go mainstream, that's when it got touchy. It got touchy with one author that I will not name, who insisted I do her book right away. I said well I can't do your book right away, I have two other books ahead of yours. She was very insistent. Finally I said why are you so insistent I do your book? I only do two to four books a year. I just can't shove you in front of these other people. She said, because Grove Press is going to have it out by December. If you don't do it before then you won't get the book at all! I said, do you have a contract with Grove Press? She said, of course. I said, you're giving me a book that you have a contract for with a large publisher. Do you realize what that could do to me? They could have sued me out of existence. She believed her work was important and she didn't care if she destroyed Shameless Hussy Press.

George Sand's: *The Haunted Pool*

Reti: Please tell me about George Sand.

Alta: There's the world's greatest bookstore, Moe's Books. I walked in one day and John Wong said, "I've got a book you might like." He handed me *The Haunted Pool* by George Sand. I took it across the street and I thought this is kind of nice. I wonder if I could publish this book? Just about that time there was a show on Channel 9 called "The Infamous Woman," about George Sand. It talked about her and her love affair with Chopin, of course.

It talked a little bit about her writing, a little bit about her children. But the big deal was that she was this infamous woman who had affairs and dressed like a man. So I was interested because of that. She sounded great and I liked the book. I called up the publisher and said, I think the copyright has run out, but I thought I better call you. The publisher asked, are you a small press? I said yeah, I'm not, but that's what they call me. I'm an alternative press. He said, well to you that book would be a big deal. I said yeah, it sure would. He said, to us it's old. It's history. I said I can do it? He said you got it. I credited him in the front of the book, John Dodd. It was Dodd Mead.

Reti: You did a fascimile of it.

Alta: Yeah. We didn't re-type or anything. We just sent the book.

Book Printers

By this time I had a printing company that I worked with, so I wasn't doing the books myself. The last book I did myself on my AB Dick 360 out in the garage was Ntozake's. The reason I did it, because by then I could have hired another printer to do it, was I loved Ntozake's book so much that I wanted to print it. So *For Colored Girls* is the last book that I printed.

Lorelei: After that they started being bound, too, not stapled.

Alta: Yes, and they were more than 28 pages. So George Sand's may have been our first bound book.

Reti: What printer were you using?

Alta: Malloy Lithography in the Midwest.

Reti: How did they react to your books?

Alta: They were wonderful, absolutely wonderful. They always did a fabulous job for us and got it done when they said they would. They were the best to work with. I was able to meet deadlines with them.

Reti: I know that some book printers have not been the best about feminist literature.

Alta: Yes, in fact when Crossing Press published my book *I Am Not a Practicing Angel* one printer refused to do it. Another printer destroyed the copy they sent him. They had trouble finding a printer that would do it. They went through at least three printers before they found someone willing to do that book. I said, *Playboy* comes out every month! Every month you get this sleazy magazine and you won't publish my poetry. How backward is this?"

Letters to Women

Alta: When I published *Letters to Women*, the only book we could find of women's love poems was Sappho. Between Sappho and me what happened? It's like, come on, we have 2000 years of silence here? I was working in a rare bookstore three years ago and I asked, is it really true that between Sappho and me there was nothing? And David said, oh no, of course that's not true. In 1933 a book was published by a woman of love poems to women, but you can't tell that's what it is. So there's Sappho, there's some book in 1933, and then there's *Letters to Women*.

Angel and I were asked to do a reading, and although I had done the first feminist poetry reading, there had been men at that reading. This was the first women's only reading. I really felt like I was carrying a torch for *Letters to Women*, an Olympic torch, saying, this has to come out!

Reti: But later on you were publishing books like *Deluged with Dudes* that were about relationships with men, at a time when lesbian separatism was at its height.

Alta: I'd already been disowned by all those people. I had been so tossed out of so many groups by that time. I knew it was going to happen again, of the few who were still speaking to me, I knew I was going to catch flak for it.

Reti: Did you?

Alta: Oh yeah. Shameless Hussy Press started with *Letters to Women*, which were love poems to women. And it ended with *Deluged with Dudes*.

I think I [once] did a women's only poetry reading where men were not invited, because I remember throwing some guy out.

Lorelei: I remember objecting to that.

Alta: Because how the women in the women's movement were treating me, I didn't do that more than once or twice. I really realized that women were not better people than men. It's a very important lesson in being a feminist, and I got it very early on because of how I was treated, and the threats I was getting.

Lorelei: You mean it wasn't my little seven-year-old logic telling you that reverse discrimination was not okay? (laughter)

Alta: That did help. Which brings up another point, I'm the only feminist publisher in the 1970s who published men. All the others only published women. I decided to do it according to statistics the way they were when I started the press. When I started the press 94 percent of the books were by men. So with Shameless Hussy 94 percent of the books are by women.

Reti: Fair enough.

Alta: Yeah, that's what I said.

Lorelei: For what it's worth, later on in college I realized the importance of women's only meetings, where women could feel free and not under attack by men. But by then I'd already thrown my seven-year-old justice fits.

Alta: There were people who objected to Angel playing music at my readings. But one of the comments that really got to me was a woman who called herself Pat the Dyke. She came up to me after a reading and she said, "You know, love is so precious, that whenever it happens, between whomever it happens, we should celebrate it."

Reti: Great.

Lorelei: Hear, hear. And you always did.

Alta: (laughter) Still do.

Deluged with Dudes

People were upset by *Deluged with Dudes*. I knew they would be. I resisted that book for a long time, for at least three years. Julia Vinograd kept saying, "Publish that funny story about the guy in New Jersey." Simon

kept saying, “you know your best poems are your love poems, Alta.” After three years of hearing those comments. . . I knew I was closing the press. I knew Shameless Hussy Press was coming to an end. I had found some young women who said they wanted to buy it. They went to a convention representing Shameless Hussy with the most appalling flyer. I thought I just can’t sell to these people.

Reti: What was appalling about it?

Alta: It was S&M. Not my schtick, so I cancelled the sale.

Deluged with Dudes. I had so much fun writing that book. I could have written that book forever. I could still be writing that book if I hadn’t had to meet a deadline.

Reti: It’s hard when you’re the publisher, too.

Alta: I realized that some of the stuff that I really loved just didn’t fit in that book. I had to act as my own editor as well. It just ate my life. For eighteen months I worked on that book and typed and re-typed. I’d say okay, that’s it. Then I’d sit down at this rent-a-computer in my neighborhood next to the theater, and I’d get so involved. I’d say, no I have to rework this and I have to rework that. I have more finished copies of that book. I’ve got at least 22 fully finished copies of that book.

Reti: That was 1989, right?

Alta: Yes, because I started the press in 1969 and closed it in 1989. So when that book came out I expected, actually, a lot more flak than I got, but as I say, so many people by then were not talking to me, or had disowned me, that I got a lot less than I expected, but I did get some. And I also felt that some people might feel betrayed, which I felt bad about. There was one case . . . I was at a women's publishing conference, a women's conference of some kind, and I was there with my books, at Spelman College in Atlanta. I was there during a heat wave and was staying at a bed and breakfast and six people died. I have MS and being in the heat is not good for me. I had to go to a hotel, even though I couldn't afford it, but I couldn't afford to die either. So I went to a Hilton, and I wasn't used to all the locks and all the razz-ma-tazz of the Hilton, but it was nice and cool. Anyhow, I walked out of my room and I couldn't get back in. So I went downstairs to the desk and said I've locked myself out. They said prove it. I said, well I'm in room 644 and I'm locked out. They said well where's your ID. I said it's in the room. They said how did you pay? I said with a credit card. Well, what's your credit card number. I said, I don't have it memorized. They said, well sorry we can't let you in the room. I said, that's my room! You have to let me in the room. There was a security person standing in the back who moved closer to the counter. They said, isn't there any way you can prove it? I said I can tell you my name. I can give you all the

information you have on your computer. My name's Alta! They said Alta what? I said just Alta. By this time they were saying okay, there's the door, just leave. The security person walked closer and said, [sotto voce] "Your name's Alta?" I said yeah. She said, "Alta of Shameless Hussy?" Yeah. She said, "I read every book you've ever written." And the security guard walked me up and let me in.

Reti: Oh, that's great.

Alta: I thought about that woman when I did *Deluged with Dudes*. I thought, I hope she doesn't feel betrayed.

Reti: Maybe she would just say that love is a great thing?

Lorelei: Hopefully. We don't know. Sometimes it's hard to see past the pain.

The End of Shameless Hussy Press

Reti: Why did you decide to close the press?

Alta: I was tired. I actually read in a small business magazine that the average family company lifespan is twenty years, unless the children want to take it over. Sixty percent of the time they don't. Forty percent of the time maybe one or two of the kids will be interested and maybe the

business will go on. But for most family businesses twenty years is a good lifespan. Shameless Hussy was exactly twenty years.

Lorelei: Part of that was by design. You were thinking about it at eighteen and nineteen years and thought twenty would be a nice round number.

Alta: I didn't push it because I was exhausted. I'd actually wanted to close down in the early 1980s. Jennifer Stone was working for the press then and she said, "You can't quit now! Ronald Reagan is in power!" So I didn't quit. But the press shows that the last ten years I was tired. The press shows it and the books show it.

Lorelei: You were really excited when you thought that you had found people that you would want to sell the press to carry it on.

Alta: I was. But they didn't have their bid in on time. If they can't get their bid in on time how are they going to get a book out on time?

Lorelei: Well look at the way you did your first couple of books, Mom. Have a heart!

Alta: Yeah, but I met deadlines.

Lorelei: I guess I didn't see that. I just saw that I was collating the books and you were going out with a big cardboard box.

Alta: Yeah, but I met deadlines. Those girls didn't meet a deadline and they had an S&M flyer. Three strikes, you're out. I wasn't going to go for three. Those were two really big ones.

Motherhood as an Institution

Reti: Let's talk about being a mom in this culture.

Alta: We don't get job training and it's the hardest job in the world. If we screw it up nothing else matters. Jackie Kennedy said that and she's right.

Lorelei: It is the hardest work in the world.

Alta: It's the hardest, man. If you have bad job training, like a bad mom, that doesn't help. People learn how to be good parents. There are skills to it. If people learn those skills they can be good parents no matter how dysfunctional their families were. But no one thought in those terms back then. We are a nation of immigrants. We have left behind the villages and the traditions of support, and this whole nuclear family, a woman alone in a house with kids, is a terrible system.

Reti: I saw some of your writing about that. It was very moving.

Alta: I don't feel I was a really good mom. Both my kids have suffered for that. They're both still paying the price for it.

Lorelei: Mom did a lot of things right and a lot of things wrong. All of my parents, all of my six parents tried very hard to try new things and not to repeat the mistakes their parents made. And that is always a dangerous gamble. You did a lot of things right.

Alta: Glad to hear it.

Reti: I was talking to Jacquelyn Marie, the Women's Studies Librarian (at UCSC) and she was telling me about that time. She was a mom in the early 1970s in Berkeley. She was saying there weren't that many women who had kids in the movement. People would say okay you want to go do this? She would say no, I need to go spend time with my daughter. They would look at her like she was crazy. There was no support for that at all.

Alta: None. And they put housewives down constantly. *Ms. Magazine* put down housewives. It was unbelievable. Terrible. At-home moms. We weren't even called working. Working women were women who worked outside the home.

Lorelei: I remember when someone came out with the phrase, "Every mother is a working mother." It was a big deal.

Alta: I bought five buttons that said that. It's the most disrespected job in the world. It's the hardest. The only counter we have to that is Mother's Day. And Mother's Day is a really big deal. I'm very glad we have that.

You asked me earlier, why would women want to attack my press? Have you ever heard of the ghetto mentality? That's what it is. Turning on your own kind. It's easier to fight the person next door instead of the person at the top of the ladder. That's how I saw it. I saw it in world-wide historical terms. I very rarely saw it as a single woman being nasty to me.

Lorelei: I also wonder if there was some of the kind of homophobia you see in people in the closet?

Alta: Yeah. I don't want to admit that I also want what you're looking for.

Reti: What? That I want to be a shameless hussy?

Alta: (laughter)

The Shameless Hussy T-Shirt

Reti: I want to ask you about the T-shirt that said, "Stare at your own damn tits!"

Alta: I just got sick of men staring at my tits!

Reti: Did people buy the shirt and wear it?

Alta: Well, it's interesting. I thought it would sell a million copies. I thought I finally have a million-seller here. I made fifty of them and I've still got ten of them.

Reti: Do you think it was too scary?

Alta: I took it to the American Booksellers Association convention and I thought it would fly off the table.

Lorelei: Well the thing is, if you really don't like people staring at them, that's only going to make them stare more!

Reti: We had it hanging up in the exhibit.³

Lorelei: She mentioned that. She came back and said, oh they have the T-shirt hanging up.

Reti: Were you worried about it being up there?

Alta: It was funny because before I went I thought, oh God, this is one of those things. How do I dress for this? I ended up wearing a shirt with ink on it, because I was going to talk about Shameless Hussy Press when I used to do all the printing, so I wore a striped shirt with ink on it. It was a big deal. I'd been looking forward to this for a long time. And I went in there and I felt my books had died and gone to heaven. That's really what I felt. Jacquelyn Marie walked me in there and showed me the exhibit, and I saw the T-shirt and I just laughed and thought, I guess I didn't need to worry

³In spring, 2000, UCSC's McHenry Library held an exhibit on women's studies which included materials from the Shameless Hussy Press Archive, on deposit in Special Collections.

about how I dressed. Even I was kind of shocked, and that's my shirt! And there was a picture of me next to it [in the exhibit case]. I thought, well I guess I'm not to my dignified old age yet.

Leap, Leap: The Shameless Hussy Logo

Reti: What about your logo?

Alta: *Leap, Leap.* That's when I was living in a halfway house for women that I started, a place for women to go if they were leaving their husbands. Back then women couldn't just go out and get jobs and say okay you son of a bitch. You beat me. I'm leaving. If you left your husband chances were pretty high you would end up on the street.

So there I was in my favorite room in Harwood House, which is about half the size of this room, and was basically a wardrobe closet in a very wealthy home. But to me it was perfect. It was a small room. I just had my bed and my desk, a nice window, and that's all you need. So I was in my little room and Mady Sklar came over, who is a great artist who illustrated Mary Mackey's book, *Immersion*, and she drew this little thing while we were talking. It was a little doodle. I looked at it and it was a woman jumping and it said, "Leap. Leap." I said, oh Mady, I like that so much. Can you put that on my wall? She said sure. She drew it on my wall and it just looked wonderful. I said can you do a really nice drawing of it? It was scribbled on a newspaper end. So she did and within a couple of months I was

publishing a book, and I was able to call my press Shameless Hussy Press. I looked at Mady's drawing and thought that would be neat. So that became our logo.

Writing

Reti: Alta, when did you first start writing?

Alta: I started when I was four. I wrote down what the grown-ups were saying about each other, because I knew that's what journalists did. They told stories about what was going on in the town I was growing up in, which was Reno. Well it turned out some of the grown-ups didn't want the other grown-ups to know what they had been saying about them. So my first venture into journalism was not pleasant. All the copies got torn up, and I got spanked!

When I was in the fifth grade, I was elected to be the reporter for the class. I won the Best Reporter of the Year award for my junior high school. So that encouraged me further. Then at Castro Valley High, I worked on the yearbook, which won awards nationally. So that was also encouraging. I used to keep a notebook and a pen by my bed for ideas that came to me at night. My first husband got very angry about it and told me to stop doing that. I did.

My second husband, John Oliver Simon, is a writer. He bought a printing press when we were together, and he taught me how to print. He started a magazine, and he and Pat Parker, and I were the editors. I submitted three poems anonymously. Pat said, "These are pretty good. I wonder who did them?" I said, "I did." She laughed. Then she said, "Who did them?" I said, "I did," She said, "Prove it." So she held the poems close to her chest and I recited them. She said, "Oh I guess you really wrote them." Simon said, "Those are pretty good. I think we can put them in." That was my next leap into publishing. I took a writing class at Laney College in Oakland, and got some poems in their magazine.

Then Simon published a small book of mine. It sold out in six months. We were astonished. It was called *Freedom's in Sight*. You can occasionally find it from rare book dealers for about seventy five dollars now. I actually paid fifty dollars to get a copy for myself, because of course I only saved one copy, and now I want two copies for my kids. I had to pay fifty dollars for my own book. That was a shock, because I used to sell it for fifty cents.

Reti: When did you start considering yourself a writer?

Alta: When I was four. Really. I always knew. I was reading a book by Pearl Buck when I was in grammar school, and one of her lines was that she knew then that she was writer. I thought, I'm a writer.

My mother actually didn't believe that I could read. She thought that someone else had helped me with all this. She said, "Read something to me." So we went down to the basement, and on this shelf there was Ridpath's *History of the World*. I pulled one out and started reading. I couldn't read all the big words but . . . She started screaming, "Come down. Come down. Altie's reading *The History of the World!*" I wasn't even in school yet.

Reti: That's wonderful! You just taught yourself?

Alta: Well, my grandma used to get the *Saturday Evening Post* and we'd read the cartoons together. I guess that helped. But no one knew how I had learned to read. It's like some people learn how to play music very young.

Musical Influences

Reti: In one of your poems you said that music was your earliest heritage.

Alta: Yes.

Reti: Your father was a musician.

Alta: My parents had a piano store. In the same basement as the *History of the World* there were about a dozen pianos. We lived in our piano store. Or our piano store lived in our house. Back then you could just leave the door open. Customers would come in, and I would show the pianos, because it

was a great selling device to have this little girl sit down and peel off some nice music. There were half a dozen pianos in my bedroom, two pianos in the front window, and the rest in the basement. My father had played clarinet and saxophone for big bands, and my mother had been raised by her aunt, who taught music at the Chicago Conservatory. So my mother was very good on piano as well. She did mostly pop-style. My dad did big band and swing-style. But they both loved classical music. My piano teacher lived next door. She was my aunt and she was a classical pianist. So I was surrounded by wonderful, wonderful music.

Reti: Did you ever think about becoming a musician?

Alta: My mom just kept telling me, “Your aunt is so ashamed of you. You never practice.” When I spoke to my aunt before she died she said, “Alta, you were so good we had a family conference about whether to send you to Mills [College]. Don’t you remember at the recitals we always put you in for whoever didn’t show up? That’s because we knew you could play whatever they were going to play.” I was eight-to-twelve years old during those recitals. I was playing things that much older people were playing, just on sight. Things I hadn’t rehearsed. It could have occurred to me that my mom was not telling me the truth when she said my aunt was so ashamed of me, but I believed her, because she was my mom. It wasn’t until the late 1980s that I found out that anybody in the family thought I could play worth a peawad. But part of that discouragement may have

been, and this is my brother's theory, that my mom thought musicians were all crazy or drug addicts, because in the jazz scene there were lots of drugs, and she didn't want me to go into that field. The classical music scene is a little different. But the long hours and the isolation of practicing have been documented. There are plenty of pianists who make it very big and then have breakdowns. That's not worth it. So I didn't really think of it ever as a possibility for a life path, but I've never stopped. I started performing again publicly about four years ago. For a couple of years I was performing almost every month in the Bay Area.

The brain has special neurons. Verbal parts go in one part of the brain and musical parts go in another part of the brain. That's why people in a coma can hear music. When I was in a coma in Costa Rica I remember Uncle Alfredo coming and serenading me every afternoon. So when the brain has problems, like when a person has multiple sclerosis, which is what I have, or when people have had strokes, part of the brain goes out. I read years ago that one of the best ways to heal the brain is to get the right hand and the left hand working together. So I took up piano again.

That's why I started performing again. I've discovered a thing that a singer told me, who also performs. She said her teacher said don't try to do the hard stuff that everybody does. Pick stuff you're good at, that maybe people aren't as familiar with, and you'll sound great. So that's what I'm doing. I gave up trying to play Beethoven sonatas, because there are two

dozen really professional pianists who can wing through those, and I go stumble stumble. I pick shorter pieces and stuff that isn't as well known. I'm very happy with it. Two women who were at one of my concerts recently went out and bought pianos afterwards. One of them said, "I knew you weren't going to be Van Cliburn, so I wasn't expecting that. I just saw the joy you get from playing, and I thought, I want to do that." The other woman said, "I realized I'm never going to be Glenn Gould, but I can still have fun with a piano." They both went out and bought pianos. I just got a call from Mitsuye Yamada, and she said, because of you I am taking piano. She took up piano at the age of 74, and she's playing Chopin nocturnes! I said, "Mitsuye! You just took up piano and you're playing Chopin." Mitsuye's obviously very gifted, because Chopin nocturnes took me about six years.

The lives of the greatest jazz artists were so sad. Ella Fitzgerald was homeless for two years when she was a teenager. Louis Armstrong had a terrible, terrible family life. And they came out to be two of the greatest artists of the twentieth century. That's why jazz has been so important to me.

What they went through is in their music, but it's not—I was abused by my family. You can say things in music and people will sort of understand, but they won't get the details. It's not the kind of writing that I was trying to do. A friend of mine asked me what he thought my role in writing in

America has been. I said I opened Pandora's box. There were lots of things that women had never talked about. I just started writing about them.

Music was a way to say what I was going through as a child, without using words and getting spanked for writing it down. But once I was out of that house, and able to use words and get published instead of hit, the writing became the way to do it, and the music dropped out. I just refocused into writing. So there's been an interaction between the two. What I can't say with music, I can say with words. And what I can't say with words I can say with music sometimes. When I was really playing a few years ago people kept saying, are you still writing and I'd say no, now I'm doing music. I did pretty much switch over. It's like changing stations on the radio. When you change from KJAZ to talk radio, you're on a different station.

I don't know if writing and music will ever come closer together. There is such a thing as songwriting! I wrote a song when I was seven: "I'm going fishin' and I don't want to catch no one but you!" Growing up in Reno we were exposed to country western music. There was one guy who did a request show, and he would play jazz. So every week my brother and I would call this request show and request the same songs. He just got so he would answer the phone and say, "It's the Gerrey kids. Put on Screamin' Jay." Because we just wanted Screamin' Jay Hawkins, "Gonna put a spell

on you,” and Louis Armstrong. But he didn’t want to play them every week, so he’d sort of alternate.

Reti: You grew up in Reno.

Alta: Yeah. People used to say wow that must have been weird. I had nothing to compare it to. I didn’t know if it was weird or not. But you don’t grow up in Reno, or Las Vegas, or some town that’s really run by criminals, without it having an effect on your life. So it had an effect. One of the main effects is it silences me, because I know so much.

Reti: And there’s a lot you can’t talk about because it’s not safe.

Alta: Yeah, even though I opened Pandora’s box, I opened it in a general way. What happened in Reno in the 1940s, someone else can write about it. And other people have. It does sort of nag at me that I haven’t told that part of the story. But that’s why, and I have no intention of doing so.

Reti: Your family left Reno when you were twelve?

Alta: Yes, that’s probably what saved my life, because most of my cousins died before they reached my current age. The ones that are alive, one’s in an institution, and the other is still involved in the family dirt. It’s not good. We moved to Castro Valley, to the Bay Area because my brother was blind. He was going to be going to the Berkeley School for the Blind, which

is what my father did as well. My father was blind. He got sent there and his family stayed in Nevada. He said, I don't ever want my son to go through what I went through. So they closed down the piano shop and figured out a way to get some income after retirement by buying a duplex, and we all moved to California.

Castro Valley is a very tight, white (or it was at that time) town, with a lot of the same elements as Reno. Just a few months after we moved to Castro Valley, one of the other parents started a program in the public school for his blind daughter. My brother didn't have to go to the boarding school for the blind anymore. That was just luck of the draw, that we landed in the one town in the whole country that was opening up classes to the blind. So my brother didn't have to keep going to the Berkeley School for the Blind. He hated it. He looks at that as the most difficult part of his life.

Reti: Your brother is still alive?

Alta: Yeah.

Reti: You don't have any other siblings?

Alta: Well, there was a sister who died before I was born.

Reti: What is your creative process like?

Alta: Well I am one of those people who thinks that everything is a creative process. Making tea is a creative process. Talking to a friend is a creative process.

Reti: Do you like to write in cafés?

Alta: When stuff comes out, it comes out anywhere I am. It can come out when I'm driving, which is inconvenient, or when I'm talking to somebody, when I grab a piece of paper. I have written in cafés. There was a wonderful café in the 1960s that was a great place to write, that isn't what it used to be. The Cafe Mediterranean on Telegraph. It was a writer's haven. People would come up to me and say, "I want to be a writer. What should I do?" I'd say, "Hang out in the Med."

Writing is like a volcano. It just comes out. It doesn't wait for a convenient moment, like my first husband saying don't keep pen and paper by the bed. Well, what if it comes out at eleven at night, pal? He called three weeks ago and asked me to forgive him. I said, "For what, specifically?" He said, "I should have supported you more. I didn't support you in your dreams, and I regret that, and I should have. I hope you forgive me." So I said, "well do you want to hear the stuff I'm still mad about?" He said, "Yeah." So I told him. It was quite the conversation. It's the kind of conversation you hope you have with everybody before you die. Clean out the closets.

A Woman Who Burns Away Masks

Reti: I have a couple of quotes about your writing. One is from Jennifer Stone. She wrote, “I know there is a core of fear in women. Nearly every woman I know wears a mask to hide her fear and pain. Alta seemed to burn away the mask.”⁴ My question was, how did you become a woman who burned away masks?

Alta: People stuck cigarettes on my skin. One of the things I rarely talk about is that I was tortured. The rate of the multiple sclerosis in the general population is one in ten thousand. It’s a very, very rare disease. I went to a support group for torture survivors. In the torture support group the rate is one in fourteen. The kind of torture that I was subjected to caused brain damage. That’s my theory on why I have multiple sclerosis. Doctors have always wondered why there seem to be two kinds of multiple sclerosis—one where a person gets steadily worse and dies very quickly, usually within two years. That’s what doctors told me would happen to me. The other kind which goes into remission, or has periods of quietude. Thank God that’s what I’ve got, or seem to have. I think if the brain damage was caused by abuse it doesn’t grow like the other kind of MS. The other kind of MS takes over the brain. The kind that’s caused by abuse causes scars, but if you stop being abused, you don’t get new scars.

⁴Jennifer Stone, “alta: shameless hussy,” *City Miner*, Vol 1. no. 3 November 1976, p. 11.

The mask was partly burned away by the pain that I was put in by being tortured. As I said, there are things I don't want to reveal, but as a torture survivor I do feel it is important to say that there are families who torture their own children. This is much more in the news than it was. We hear of mothers who burn their children, mothers who drown their children, mothers who try and smother their children, and mothers who kill their children. Or fathers. Or both. That's how our family was. Hopefully, I will never have to live in as much fear as I lived in when I was a kid.

People have asked me how I could go register voters in the ghetto. Wasn't I afraid? I guess a person who grew up in a more functional household might have been more afraid. I used to travel alone and go to conferences. I was very often the only single woman on an airplane. I would go to rent a car and they wouldn't wait on me because they'd be waiting for my husband to show up. But none of that was as scary as just living in my parents' house. So in a way there may have been a bravery that came out of that, or a willingness to take risks that looked a little too risky to a lot of other women.

Reti: In her essay, "The Feminist Poet: Alta and Adrienne Rich," Suzanne Juhasz said about your poetry, "This kind of poem usually does not use the imaginative transitions of figurative language. Rather it calls on the impact of the literal detail to fly directly like an arrow to touch feeling to feeling."

Your poetry has often been described as emotional, even shocking. What do you think of this?

Alta: Simon and I used to argue about making poetry comprehensible. He said that he worked so hard to write the poem, the reader should have to work that hard to read the poem. I said poetry should be understandable to my Aunt Rede. I want everyone who reads my poems to understand them. I did away with a lot of what would be called poetic language. However, I had people ask me what I meant, when what I said was just exactly what I meant. I couldn't believe it! One guy was talking about how he didn't like poetry because it didn't make any sense. I said, "Okay look at this." He looked at it and said, "So what's it mean? Can you explain it to me?" I'll recite the poem now. It was titled, "Death."

I awoke

3 a. m.

killed another cockroach

heard clearly

do not be so afraid

I happen to everybody.

He said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "I'm talking about death!" He said, "you said 'heard clearly.'" I said, "Yeah. I assume that was death talking to me." He said, "Well death doesn't talk to me." He put up a wall. Death didn't talk to him, so he didn't want to hear that death talked to me. I don't know if it was death, but who else is gonna say that? That's gotta be

death. When I write things as absolutely clearly as I can people can still say, "I don't get it." Simon has a point. You might as well be poetic. People don't get it anyway.

Opening Pandora's Box

That gets back to that I opened Pandora's box. There were tremendous things in our lives that I'd never seen in poetry, and it was time to start talking about them. What happened to all the lesbian women between Sappho and me?

Reti: What about Gertrude Stein?

Alta: Talk about music and poetry. You have to have a musical head to read Gertrude Stein. If you want her just to talk in progressive sentences, forget it. She thought in verbal music. You have to have a musical head. In fact, I used to read "The World is Round" to my younger daughter, who would dance while I read it.

My poetry was only shocking because it hadn't been said a million times. Now it's been said a million times. If somebody read one of my poems now they'd say, what's the big deal? There are hundreds of lesbian poets. They're getting published, and they're getting published in mainstream magazines. There was one magazine, called *The Ladder*, and that was *it* as far as any of us knew. If we wanted to get lesbian poetry published that

was it. I just thought that was ridiculous that we couldn't talk about that. There were reasons why we couldn't talk about it. People might lose their jobs. They might lose custody of their kids. There were real heavy reasons why things had to stay in such a tight closet. But in the 1960s we were tearing down all kinds of walls and I thought that was one of the walls we should tear down.

Those of us who grew up in the 1950s had this vision that if you found Mr. Right and married Mr. Right, you could have a happy home and raise healthy children. Then we started finding out that Mr. Right sometimes might get drunk and whap you upside the head. Or Mr. Right might have an affair with his secretary. The kind of things that our mothers hadn't told us to watch out for. We were all primed to have this Cinderella experience, and we kept ending up with guys like Jack Kennedy. Well, why didn't anybody warn us? I felt very unwarned and I was very angry about that. I wanted people to know that raising a child without the support of a community is very difficult work. I wanted them to know that just because some guy looks good for the first six months doesn't mean he's going to be kind to you in two years. These were essential life bits of information that had been kept from us. There were a lot of walls of secrecy and good behavior, and keep quiet about it. It's supposed to be embarrassing for the woman if her husband goes to a whore; you must be doing something wrong. Well, people don't think that anymore.

And when things did go wrong it was always our fault. That's another thing that was just too heavy a cross to bear. It wasn't always our fault. I wanted to put that out there, too. Some very, very heavy things can go wrong in life that are not mommy's fault, or wifey's fault, or daughter's fault. Things can really go wrong. Let's not always say everything is just fine, and it's the shame of this family that it's happening in this house. Which gets to the name of my company: Shameless Hussy. If we can go out without shame, we can talk about anything. It's the shame that keeps us silent, when it's not fear. The things that I was ashamed to bring up, I was determined to bring up.

Reti: I'm trying to picture what it must have been like to do a poetry reading and get up and read about this stuff. I can't picture that.

Alta: (laughter) Thank God I was in the Bay Area. And it didn't hurt that I was young and good looking. When you are young and good looking you can get away with a lot. But also, the Beatniks had been in San Francisco. Allen Ginsberg had been there. Boy, he said stuff. He saw the best minds of his generation go mad. He talked about the destruction of drugs. He was paying attention, and he talked about what this country was doing to people of his generation. Poetry was in the air in the Bay Area, and it has been for generations. That's like music as well. You don't have to be a West Coast jazz artist to know that if you feel like hanging out in your house and

banging a few chords, you're not the only person in California doing it. It's a cultural acceptance.

Reti: So what about the connection between politics and writing?

Alta: We discovered in the 1960s that politics is personal. Susan Griffin was the one who publicized rape as a political act to put women down, literally. We began to realize that the way our husbands were acting was very political. If we wanted them to shape up we'd better be feminists, and if we wanted to have lives of our own, and not just live shadow lives, like our mothers and grandmothers had, we'd better be feminists. So politics was interwoven.

We used to argue about this, too. Susie Griffin, Judy Grahn, Pat Parker, and I were the quartet of groundbreakers in 1960s and 1970s women's poetry. We would argue about how political should we make stuff. Should we stick to the personal. Susie kept saying, "the personal is political."

But in terms of what other people think of as political, I dropped out of college to go work on civil rights in 1961. I went down to Prince Edward County, Virginia, because they had closed the schools rather than integrate them. I went down and said, hey I've been student teaching and I can teach. And the black people said we don't want to start our own schools because we want to force the county and the state to open schools to

everybody, but thank you for your help. I stayed active in civil rights, and then I was very active in the anti-Vietnam war movement.

Reti: Here in the Bay Area?

Alta: Yes. I used to walk outside the draft board with a sign saying, "Support the War. Beat your Kid." Then Simon and I worked on People's Park, which was literally one of the groundbreaking things for the Green movement. They were going to put up a parking lot and we said, hey, you already tore down some beautiful Julia Morgan houses. Don't put up a parking lot. We went out there and planted trees and got tear gassed. I was political in those three areas: the Greens, anti-war movement, and civil rights. And of course, feminism became the overriding umbrella of all my political activity.

Reti: Did you see your writing as your feminist political work?

Alta: Yes.

Reti: I know that is a big debate. Is that what you're talking about when you say Pat Parker and Susan Griffin and you used to argue? Did you argue about whether writing was a political act?

Alta: Yes, and whether we should try to keep them separate. Should we be more artistic or more political? Or should we just try and make our politics artistic?

Reti: Did they disagree with that?

Alta: Oh yeah, we all disagreed with each other. We all had different styles. We were all saying different things, thank God. I mean it would be terrible if we had four women saying the same exact things. The reason why it was such a breakthrough is because we were four very distinct voices.

Reti: What do you see as your differences?

Alta: Well, Judy and Pat were lesbians. Susie and I were, at most, bisexual. But we were both married at that time and had children. Susie and I had been academically trained. I don't think Judy was. I'm not sure about Pat. And Pat was black. The rest of us were white. That was a tremendous difference. Judy was working class, and very up front about that. People thought I was working class, but I guess I wasn't. My family were bourgeois. We don't even have that term 'bourgeois' as part of the class structure in America. So there were class differences, race differences, lifestyle differences. We were all in the same age group. That was about our only similarity. We were women in the same age group, and we all could write.

One time at a panel somebody asked me a question and I said, "Well, Judy Grahn, of course, is the greatest." Then I realized Susie was sitting right next to me, and I said, "Whoops, sorry Susie." And she said, "No, Alta. It's fine. We all know that." So at least Susie and I thought that Judy was the greatest. I don't know what Pat thought. But there was no question in my mind. Judy Grahn who was the one who was really the artist of us four.

Reti: I'd hate to have to make a judgement like that. It's interesting that that was your impression at the time. Are you still in touch with Judy Grahn?

Alta: Not much. I felt very misused by her. She did apologize to me, which I appreciated, and I accept her apology, so I don't want to talk about what she did anymore. And she had to apologize to me a few years ago because we were both at the San Francisco Book Fair and she said, "What's the cane for?" I said, "I have multiple sclerosis." And she said, "You were always so dramatic." I said, "Can I quote you?" And she laughed and said yeah. Then a few days later I got a postcard from her apologizing. So I accept that apology, too. Thanks Judy, but I didn't get this disease just to be dramatic. Susan Griffin has chronic fatigue syndrome, and Pat, of course, died of cancer. We don't need to have a contest to see about how tragic our lives have been.

Reti: What was it like to be a feminist writer in the 1980s?

Alta: People weren't threatening my press in the 1980s like they had in the 1970s. That was a great relief. And there were so many women's presses. It was like mushrooms. It was wonderful! I didn't feel as isolated. And libraries were excited about our work. It began to be really clear that the historical movement that we were a part of was not going to be ignored. That was a wonderful thing. And librarians were asking me to come speak at the American Library Association. I was always thrilled to.

A couple of women have done their doctoral theses about my poetry. One of them sent me a copy of it. It actually creeped me out, but that was because her take on it was very distressing. But that's because she's also a survivor and it was hard to read about what she'd been through.

Reti: Are you doing any writing now?

Alta: I'd been saying recently I'm not writing anymore because I've said everything I've had to say. One of my friends who is a painter keeps saying, "I don't believe that." Well, I haven't written much about my foster kids. I'm tempted to do that, and have it published it online where it just goes to people who are interested.

Reti: What do you think is the future of feminism?

Alta: It will go on until everything is fixed. Things aren't fixed.

Reti: So you don't see feminism as being dead.

Alta: Oh, it's never been dead. They always say that. Feminism will never be dead as long as women are being beaten by their husbands, or raped by strangers, or sold into sexual slavery, or don't get paid as much as men, or can't get good health care. We have to have feminism. That's how we become free people.

Reti: Thank you, Alta. Is there anything you want to add?

Alta: I love my life.

Appendix

*Chronological List of Shameless Hussy Press Publications
Extracted from the Online Archive of California Finding Aid*

Index

A

Aldebaran Review 20

Alta

and creative process 54

and music 47

early life 45, 47, 52

American Booksellers Association 16

American Library Association 16

anti-Vietnam war movement 62

Armstrong, Louis 50

B

Berkeley, California 22

C

California School for the Blind, Berkeley 52

Camp Notes 14, 28

Castro Valley High School 45

Castro Valley, California 52

civil rights movement 62

Cody, Pat 10

Cody's Books 10

Coffee House Press 17

Cremonesi, Alma 16, 21

Crossing Press 16, 32

D

Davis, Thulani 27
Deluged with Dudes 33, 35
Di Prima, Diane 9
Diana Press 18
Dodd Mead Publishers 31
Dodd, John 31
Dustbooks 17

E

ecology movement 22
Edward the Dyke 9, 12

F

feminism 61
Fitzgerald, Ella 50
For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf 27
Freedom's in Sight 10, 46
Fulton, Len 16

G

Glide Memorial Church 13
Gotham's Bookmart 15
Grahn, Judy 9, 12, 13, 17, 61, 64
Griffin, Susan 7, 8, 11, 13, 17, 22, 24, 61, 64

H

Hayward, California 28
HerBooks Feminist Press 24

I

I Am Not a Practicing Angel 32

Immersion 44

J

jazz 50

K

Kim, Willyce 17

King, Billie Jean 27

L

Laney College 46

Los Angeles Times 8

M

Malloy Lithography 32

Miller, Henry 7

Moe's Bookstore 30

Moss, Paula 28

multiple sclerosis 49, 55

N

New York 25

Nin, Anais 7

O

Olson, Tillie 29

P

Parker, Pat 7, 11, 12, 13, 17, 25, 26, 46, 61, 64

People's Park 22, 62

Prince Edward County, Virginia 61

R

Remember Our Fire 9, 10

Reno, Nevada 52

Rosen, Ruth 8

S

San Francisco Public Library 26

San Lorenzo, California 20

Sand, George 30

Sassafrass 27

Shange, Ntozake 11, 25

Simon, John Oliver 7, 10, 12, 46, 62

Sklar, Mady 44

Sonoma State University 26

Stone, Jennifer 26, 39, 55

T

The Haunted Pool 30

Tree Farm Press 17

U

Up Haste Bookstore 10

V

Vinograd, Julia 9, 35

W

Wilson, J.J. 26

women's liberation movement 8

Women's Press Collective 17