

Isis : A Mosaic of Stories

by Marianita "Girlie" Villariba

When I began to write the story of Isis, I had many ideas about how I would approach its rich herstory. It was while reading the *Isis International Bulletin* in late 1979 that I came to be interested in the work it was doing. An opportunity to get in touch with Isis came when I was asked by my partner Ed dela Torre to join him in Rome in October 1980.

The founder of Isis, Marilee Karl, and her husband, Charles Foubert of the International Documentation and Communication Centre (IDOC) happened to be leading members of the Philippine solidarity movement in Italy and they were active in the Philippine-European support committee for the Permanent People's Tribunal (PPT). On the day I arrived in Rome, Ed, Charles and Marilee were busy with the preparations for the PPT which was going to try the case filed by the Philippine popular movement against the Marcos government for its crimes against the Filipino and Moro peoples. Ed brought me to meet Marilee and Charles, and then left the next day for Antwerp, Belgium where the PPT was

going to hold its hearings.

Marilee brought me to the Isis office in Piazza Navona. My excitement in finally getting to Isis helped me overcome the anxiety of being in a new environment. It was my first trip to Rome and I knew no one there except Ed who was so busy with solidarity work. I met the Isis International staff and warmed up to the Chilean expatriates, Ximena Charnes and Theresa Chadwick (both would return to Chile and open the Isis-Santiago office in 1984), to the artist Wai-fong Chan affectionately called Fongi (who would later join *China Standard* in Hong Kong), to Valsa Verghese (who would later help develop Isis-WICCE in Geneva and then in Kampala in 1994), and the Filipino volunteers Nelly Tang and Debbie Valencia (pioneer organisers of the Filipino migrant community).

The Isis women became my instant family and I volunteered to work at the resource centre. I learned how to document and organise information on women's issues. Marilee and the Chilean sisters inspired me to compile a list of women's organisations in various countries which later would be of great use in organising the net-

work of GABRIELA (General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action) in 1984. Valsa became my friend and she taught me many things. Fongi steered my drawing and coloring energies while the *Pinay* colleagues mentored me on the art and science of organising Filipino and Asian migrant women. Nelly and Debbie have devoted their lives to organising the Philippine women migrant solidarity movement across Europe. My friendships with all these women in Isis have spanned two decades now and I am the richer for having met them.

Let me now share with you a mosaic of letters and cartoons from the women who communicated with Isis in the late 1970s. I had a hard time choosing the letters from the so-called "Rome Files" which Marilee Karl kept and brought to Isis-Manila. Thousands of women had been communicating with Isis and they all had interesting stories. The stories speak to us of the power of information and communication. They bring to life what Isis has done in linking women across the seas to form a full circle of empowerment.

The Making of the Feminist Dictionary

May 12, 1976

Ruth Todasco
The Feminist English Dictionary
Box 1302
Chicago, Illinois 60690
USA

Dear Ruth,

Thank you for sending us the article for "The Feminist English Dictionary." We will be happy to exchange the *Isis Bulletin* for your material. We are indexing the dictionary, poster and other materials you sent us in the Isis optical computing system so that it will be available for consultation here at the Isis Resource Centre.

We are looking forward to further collaboration with you!

In sisterhood,
Marilee Karl

women. We did not carry through in this proposal for lack of funds and energy to give to it. We would have no doubt had enormous publicity from such a suit, and are still considering the possibilities of it.

Because of Webster's pressure, we were forced to dissociate from the YWCA who had subsidised the printing of the first 1,000 copies of the dictionary and were distributing it. The women at the YWCA Loop Center in Chicago, who had supported our work immediately indicated that they could no longer distribute the Dictionary because of the YW's refusal to consider a lawsuit on our behalf. After dissociating from the YWCA, and informing Webster of this fact, we never heard from Webster again. We established our own not-for-profit account and box number in Chicago and continue to distribute

the Dictionary by mail order. Many women's groups have publicised the Dictionary and it has been carried by many women's bookstores.

Webster's threat had various effects on us. I produced a poster which reflects some of the content of Volume I without the use of the definitions themselves. As I think about my motivation to do this poster, it seems to me I was responding to a need to deal with the vague menacing force which Webster represented. Whether or not the use was imminent, it operated in a real way on me. The poster itself has not been very successful. I have sold it through the Women's Liberation Workshop, 38 Earham St., London WC2, and at numerous feminist conferences. It's a consciousness-raising catalyst and it has stimulated interest in the dictionary, which is even more of a consciousness-raising catalyst. Enclosed is a copy of the poster along with Volume I of the *Feminist English Dictionary* and a flyer about our plans for Volume II.

We would like very much to receive the *Isis Bulletin*. Your issue on the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in Brussels is excellent and should have the widest possible distribution. Perhaps we would work out an arrangement to share our mailing list.

In sisterhood,
Ruth Todasco along with Gail Lockham and Jessie Sheridan, volunteer staff for the *Feminist English Dictionary*, Box 1302, Chicago, Illinois 60690, USA

Dear Sisters,

HERSTORY: THE FEMINIST ENGLISH DICTIONARY

This is a request for an exchange subscription. We would like to exchange our material for the *Isis Bulletin*.

Enclosed is material on *The Feminist Dictionary*. Volume I was published in 1973, two printings totaling 3,000. It was on microfilm by the Women's Research Center, Inc. 2325 Oak Street, Berkeley, California, and is now available on microfilm in many colleges in the U.S. (We're not sure how many have it.) It was publicised by the American Library Association and we have had numerous orders from libraries, both public and associated with universities. Our orders have been worldwide, from individuals and institutions. The U.S. press gave us extensive publicity, as a result of which we were brought to the attention of Merriam-Webster Inc. who then threatened to sue us if we did not destroy all the copies of the Dictionary and the plates. Although we had credited Webster as the source of our definitions, we had not asked their permission. We did not choose to enter into a lawsuit with Webster on the copyright issue, as it seemed ludicrous to us to fight for the right to continue to use their degrading definitions of women. Instead, I proposed a countersuit charging Webster with slanderous and libelous representation of

The Noreen Winchester Case

Noreen Winchester Comite
Gerolaan 52, ZEIST
Holland

June 10, 1978

To Isis in Rome and Geneva

Dear Sisters,

You were so kind to help us in publishing in Isis 4/5 the story of Noreen Winchester, who killed her father after five years of incest. After that, the Comite was contacted by organisations and individuals all over the world and they promised to start actions and demonstrations if Noreen would not be released.

As soon as the leave to appeal to a higher court was refused, Noreen's lawyer, Patricia Drinan, put in a petition for Noreen to get the Royal Prerogative of Mercy and at the same time the N.W.C. sent to Mr. Roy Mason (secretary of State in Northern Ireland) the proves that actions would be raised in five European countries and in America, Canada and Australia. As this was not favourable for the reputation of the British justice, Mason had no choice but releasing Noreen.

An important issue of this case is that in Belfast, the incest (20-40 percent of the families) came to the light. Political parties are concerned in taking measures against it now. Social workers, who had expressed their views that "incest was part of the culture and could not have mattered much," must take into account from now on. Judges, although they did not rehabilitate Noreen in spite of their opinion that "it was justifiable homicide" will be more careful in the future and it is not likely that such an atrocious sentence will be pronounced again.

I would like you to publish this letter, because the Noreen case is an example of what international cooperation can do and of the great importance of the Isis' work.

A woman who interviewed me after Noreen's release, finds it important to make it known that the N.W.C. consisted of one person (undersigned) who never had taken action before and doubted her own capability throughout the years she worked for Noreen. I myself think it is much more important that the N.W.C. was supported so largely. It is like a snowball, roll it and it becomes bigger all the time. Nevertheless, it might encourage other individuals to start rolling snowballs if they would not know that the initiative was taken by only one person who could not take a step without being afraid of the consequences. Just see what you can do and publish what you think is interesting. And if your English is better than mine, please use yours.

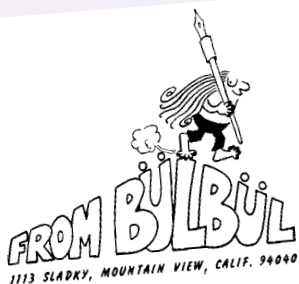
In sisterhood,

Monique Möller

Can some of you write some letters for Dessie? I enclosed information. Don't wait too long, for protest marches are on July 4th. Letters already helped Dessie's condition in prison.

Correspondence of Marilee Karl and the Cartoonist Bülbül

30 August 1978

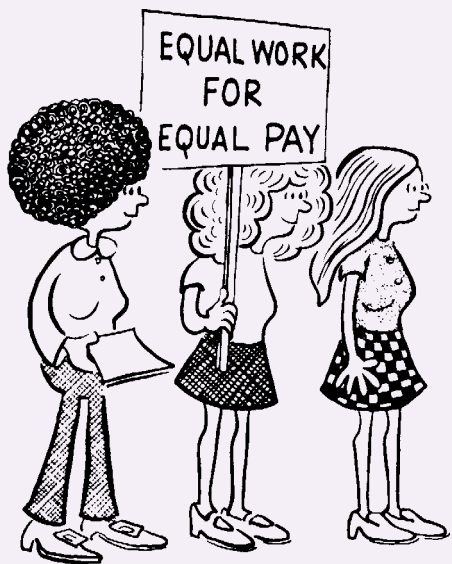


August 2, 1977

Dear Sisters of Isis and Marilee Karl,
I respond to your letter requesting permission to reprint cartoons from the collections I sent you. You have my permission to reprint cartoons from the collections I sent you. You have my permission to use them in your *International Bulletin*.

I would appreciate it if possible that you would credit the cartoons, for instance, cartoon by bulbul from (title of book), Arachne Publishing, PO Box 4100, Mountain View, California, USA. The bulletin is excellent. Keep up your good work.

In sisterhood,
Bülbül



Dear Bülbül,

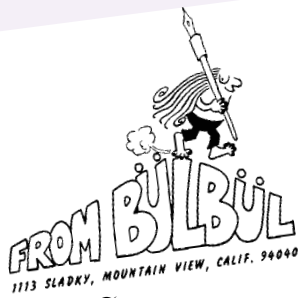
We love your drawings and cartoons. We are so happy that you have given us permission to reprint them in our Isis bulletins—as you see we have filled our pages with them. One thing we like very much about your drawings is that they show women of all races, nationalities and countries. It is so hard to find good graphics and it is particularly hard to find graphics of women of many races and nationalities which is so important especially in an international bulletin. Your cartoons have provided us and our readers with lots of laughs and have lightened the sometimes very “heavy” subject matter of the bulletins. A lot of women really enjoyed your cartoons which we included in our health bulletin. We also like your cheery drawings of women just being together.

We would like to go on using your drawings and cartoons in our Isis bulletins and wonder if you have any more recent booklets of them available. We have always credited the cartoons we’ve used and noted your publisher’s address. We really appreciate your giving us permission to use them as we are a small struggling feminist group. But we also do not want to take advantage of other women and you probably are dependent upon your drawings for your living. We are still struggling to get by but we are a little better off than we were last year and we could offer a small amount of money for using your drawings and cartoons, something like between US\$50 and US\$100. We wish we could offer you a whole lot more! One thing we could do though which might be helpful is to include a write up about you and your cartoons in an issue of the Isis bulletin. This goes out to a lot of periodicals and publishers and might be useful publicity for your work. What do you think?

If you did have more drawings and cartoons we could use, we would really love to have them. We especially like your drawings of all kinds of women together.

Looking forward to hearing from you. With warmest wishes for your work.

In sisterhood,
Marilee Karl



September 10, 1978

Dear Marilee Karl,

Glad you are using my cartoons and that they are helpful to you all. It is always nice to hear praise. I save bits of it to fortify me when I get criticized.

You asked if there were other cartoon booklets out yet—not yet but one is in the works and should be out by the first of 1979. I will send it when it's ready. In the mean time, if there are any specific areas of interest that you need cartoons just let me know and I will send a copy of cartoons you suggest.

If you want to do a write up on me that would be fine because women do like to know about artists whose work they look at. Yes the money also would be welcome...but do not strain your budget.

It is so encouraging to hear from European women. I get such a strong feeling that women all over the world are stirring and asking the most important questions and changes are happening.

Best to you all and keep up your fine work—in sisterhood,
Bulbul

December 26, 1978

Dear Bulbul,

Thank you very much for your letter. We appreciate very much your letting us use your drawings and cartoons. I am in the USA for a couple of weeks now trying to raise some funds for Isis and if I am successful (and things don't look too bad), we will send you some money.

We would also like to do a write up about you and your work. Do you have anything we could use or base our write up on? It would help if we had a little more

information on how you work—we, of course, will add our own comments on how useful and inspiring we find your material.

The cartoon books which we have at present are: *Sugar Daddy's a Sticky Myth*, *I'm not for Women's Lib...but* and *Dissecting Doctor Medi-corpse*. Any others you have out or in the works will be very welcome.

Our bulletins in 1979 (tentatively) will deal with women in rural development and food production, rape, feminist publishing and publications. All our bulletins will carry out resource listings of women's resources. In addition to cartoons, we really like to use your drawings in our resource section showing two or three women together or small groups of women of different races and ages and nationalities doing various things together or just being together (as in your marvelous poster.)

Our best wishes to you—in sisterhood,

Marilee Karl



January 7, 1979

Dear Marilee,

Hope your stay in the U.S. was enjoyable and fruitful.

Enclosed you will find some xeroxed articles which might help with background for your article on one woman cartoonist.

I am in the process of sketching some cartoons that you suggested but I do need to know when you would need them, where I should send them and whether you have size suggestions.

Have a very good year—full of energy, strength and vision.

In sisterhood,
Bulbul

October 6, 1979

Dear Bülbül,

I apologise for waiting for such a long time to answer your very, very nice letter to us about the cartoons. We have been working very hard the past few months to try to get Isis into at least a little bit more secure financial position so we can be sure we will be able to publish the next few issues. Well, I guess feminist publications like ours will never be financially secure, but I think we can safely say that we will get out this year's issues and next year's. The circulation of the bulletin has picked up a lot and that really helps.

So, now I can answer your questions about the themes of the following bulletins. Our next bulletin will be on sex-tourism and prostitution, mainly in Asia. It is probably too late for you to do any cartoons for this unless you happen to have any already on hand. This issue will also include articles about the prostitution promoted by the "rest and recreation" industries in the towns around the U.S. military bases in the Philippines. The following bulletin will be on women migrant workers, including migrant farm workers in the USA, North African and Southern European migrants in Northern Europe, Asian (mainly Filipina and Korean) migrants who work as nurses and domestics in Europe and the USA, Latin American migrants within Latin America, including indigenous domestics.

The next bulletin after that will focus on feminist publications and publishing around

the world. Instead of just doing short write-ups of resources we will feature various feminist publications and include articles on publishing feminist materials. We will include an article about your cartooning in that issue.

We have no fixed themes following these, but probably we will do an issue on child care. All the issues will continue to include resource listings of feminist publications and activities. And as I think I mentioned to you before, we really like your drawings of women of various races, ages and nationalities working together. These are good to use in the resource section of the bulletin.

As for the size, it is best if they fit in one column, i.e. 9 cm by 9 cm (about 3 ½ inches by 3 ½ inches). An occasional two-column cartoon is good too. Do you have any new books of cartoons? We would be more than happy to include them in the resource section of our next bulletin.

Hope all is going well with your work and that you continue to produce your wonderful and heartening cartoons for women's liberation!

In sisterhood,
Marilee Karl



Reaching women through *Women in Action*

Greetings from Occidental Mindoro, Philippines!

We received the *Women in Action* this morning and I am writing to you at once because of some topics that are of great importance to us.

I understand that this is the second issue of *Women in Action* you produced through desktop publishing process. In line with this, may we request for some materials or literature on this technology? We shall also be interested to participate in training workshops on desktop other traditional methods as well if in any case you would be organising such activities.

At present, we are still using the offset and sometimes letter press methods of printing. We find these a bit expensive and time-consuming but we don't have the alternative. At the village level though, we have already trained some farmer-beneficiaries on

manual mimeographing which they use on producing their newsletter.

Going back to *Women in Action*, I particularly like Kamla Bhasin's article on women's communication strategies. It is very inspiring and at the same time informative. I hope we could be involved in similar communication workshops in the future.

This is all for the moment. Looking forward to hearing from you soon. *Mabuhay* and warm regards.

Sincerely yours,
Mavic T. Cabrera
Mindoro Institute for Development, Inc.
San Jose, Occidental Mindoro, Philippines
(*Women in Action*, No. 1, 1989)

Marianita Villariba is the immediate past director of Isis International-Manila and is now active in popular education through the Education for Life Foundation.