

Newsweek and *Vanity Fair*) and yet nowhere. Part Two of *Sisters, Sexperts, Queers* explores this paradox in mainstream popular culture, and also examines the cultural productions (particularly film, music and 'zines) of lesbians themselves. The most interesting and original essay in this section is Jackie Goldsby's "Queen for 307 Days: Looking B(l)ack at Vanessa Williams and the Sex Wars." It is one Black lesbian's take on what happened when Vanessa Williams, the first African-American woman to become Miss America, was forced to step down after *Penthouse* magazine published photos of Williams engaged in lesbian sex with a white woman. Goldsby both examines her attraction to these photographs in the context of the dearth of black lesbian sexual imagery, and also interrogates "the premises on which we assumed then and continue to assume now that 'whiteness' figures the normative center of political and theoretical discussions about sexuality" - including lesbian sexuality.

Part Three of *Sisters, Sexperts, Queers* explores the meaning of home, kinship and "family" in a lesbian context. The right wing has consistently constructed lesbians and gay men as rootless, urban predators bent on destroying the heterosexual nuclear family and childhood innocence. In the current hysteria over family values, the immense creativity and tenderness of lesbian and gay kinship and support systems (particularly in the face of AIDS) have gone unrecognized. Some of that creativity is captured in anthropologist Kath Weston's article on the lesbian baby boomlet, "Parenting in the Age of Aids." Dorothy Allison, author of the acclaimed new novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, contributes a typically powerful piece on growing up as poor white lesbian trash in the Southern USA. Important as her piece is, it is largely personal; the collection as a whole lacks a more analytical discussion of class and the lesbian community.

The lesbian and gay movement in North America is right now engaged in a difficult internal battle over the merits of re-claiming notions of "fami-

ly" and "spouse" for queer liberation. Catherine Saalfield's polemic, "Lesbian Marriage ... [K]not!" takes on monogamy, "compulsory coupledom," the family, lesbian marriage and spousal benefits. She is disturbed by the increasing willingness of queers to embrace oppressive heterosexual institutions such as marriage, and asks whether "the conservative backlash of the Reagan/Bush era and the crisis of AIDS doomed alternative possibilities once and for all, leaving us to wallow in a whirlpool of cynicism and apology?" Lourdes Arguelles' evocative and celebratory essay on the "crazy wisdom" of Cuban lesbians also decries the tameness and conservatism of contemporary lesbian life. Referring to Teresa, a *tortillera* [dyke] she knew in Havana, Arguelles writes:

the memory of her disdain for 'fitting in' keeps alive for me the archetype of the lesbian as a stranger, a misfit, one who is homeless, mysterious, unpredictable, and barren. For me this balances the increasing 'ladyfication' of our lesbian communities, with their penchant for ordinariness, procreation, and conventionality.

Saalfield and Arguelles are welcome reminders that there are still some crazy *tortilleras* and strange sisters out there who continue to make trouble, even if the rest of the community is actively embracing a domesticated lesbian existence.

In the end, however, I found this section on home the least satisfying of the four sections in *Sisters, Sexperts, Queers*. While Saalfield touches on many important questions, her essay is too brief to provide any sustained analysis of the intense homophobia and heterosexism embedded in the right-wing's "family values" campaign, and its effects on lesbian and gay lives, sexual/domestic arrangements and political strategy.

Part Four, on community and activism, unfortunately does not take up this question either; the focus of this section is largely on internal queer community politics. Two essays examine the politics of women-only groups, while two others look at

mixed lesbian and gay organizations, in particular ACT UP, AIDS service organizations and Queer Nation. Both Alisa Solomon and Lisa Kahaleole Chang Hall focus on the tendency within lesbian and women-only organizations to "forget the political and obsess on the correct" as if all the problems of the world could be solved by altering personal behaviour: "You end up," says one woman quoted by Solomon, "with a movement of five people who can follow every single rule instead of fifty people in struggle."

A lot of Solomon's examples of "political correctness gone wrong" are drawn from a manifesto produced by a Boston-based disabled women's group which called for, among other things, banning scents at lesbian, gay, feminist and left events. This has the effect of suggesting that disabled dykes are first among the Political Correctness Queens, and this is particularly unfortunate given that the anthology has nothing else to say about the lives and issues of disabled lesbians.

Hall reminds us of the painful reality that coalition-building "often means working with lesbians we can't stand." Citing Bernice Johnson Reagon's well-known article on coalition politics in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, Hall argues that "home" and "coalition" are not identical and that many women want their coalitions to be "safe spaces" rather than sites of struggle and transformation.

By the eighties, some lesbians were beginning to flee the trashing, conflict and just plain intensity of working in women-only groups in order to join coalitions and services made up of both lesbians and gay men. Maxine Wolfe, for example, became active in ACT UP New York out of frustration with identity politics and "the inability of lesbians to organize around or even figure out what their issues were." The final two articles in *Sisters, Sexperts, Queers* explore what happens when dykes and fags work together politically. They detail both the surprising pleasures of lesbian and gay male political and personal alliances, as well as the tensions, even explo-

sions, which have emerged.

Ruth Schwartz's essay on lesbians in AIDS activist groups and service organizations is the most probing of the four articles in this section, while Maria Maggenti's impressionistic take on Queer Nation, ACT UP and being a lesbian in the era of "dyke chic" is less analytical, but does capture some of the energy of the encounter between gay men and lesbian feminists in mixed activist groups:

In that hothouse called AIDS activism ... screaming, getting my butt kicked, and loving gay men for the first time, I experience things that lesbian feminism has not prepared me for and I discover that without that feminism I never could have lasted so long in a community made up of so many men. Feminism has not taught me about that delicious outrageous queer decadence indulged in by gay men as a survival strategy. So I dance about in my leather jacket and help gay-boy friends zip up the back of their goofy dresses as we march off to close down the stock exchange. But feminism has given me a political discipline that is sometimes more useful than drag.

Similarly, gay male sexual directness (often in the form of a constant stream of anecdotes about sexual adventures, crushes and tricks) made some lesbians uneasy, while leading others to a renewed appreciation of their "own gayness as a proud, lustful identity" and a dissatisfaction with the sexual silences within lesbian culture.

Frequently, however, political differences between lesbian feminists and gay men in AIDS services such as hotlines could be painful. Schwartz writes that "some of my most basic assumptions about the world, understandings I shared with other feminist lesbians about the role of class, race, and gender in people's lives, were brand-new and highly disputed concepts for many gay men." In addition, the increasing bureaucratization and professionalization of some AIDS organizations and the changing demographics of the PLWA population have produced new conflicts. Hard questions about activist versus bureaucratic models of fighting AIDS, and about the failure of many

gay, white men to see the need to build coalitions with women and people of colour, particularly now that AIDS is devastating the African-American and Latino/a communities, have been raised. Similar tensions emerged in some AIDS activist groups such as ACT UP.

To make matters worse, the larger lesbian community has not always understood, and supported, individual lesbians committed to AIDS activism. Some lesbians have complained that "too many women chose AIDS work over more 'authentically lesbian' issues." Lesbian AIDS activists are frequently asked, "If the AIDS epidemic had primarily affected women, would gay men have mobilized in the same numbers to help us?" Critics wonder whether lesbians are simply doing what women always do: taking care of men. Lesbians of colour working in AIDS organizations are confronted by community members who want to know why they work with "all these white men."

In response, some lesbian AIDS activists and workers have decided to re-direct their political energies, whether to the fight against breast cancer or in work with the growing numbers of HIV-positive women. Others have challenged the prevailing definition of what constitutes a lesbian issue. As Schwartz jokes, "the only exclusively lesbian issue" out there is the much feared "Lesbian Bed Death." But in the end, Schwartz's article fails to articulate exactly why lesbians ought to involve themselves in AIDS activism. In my view, the writing of lesbian AIDS activist Cindy Patton provides a much clearer political vision. In a 1990 interview, Patton argued:

We are in the midst of a huge cultural upheaval around sexuality. At a time when so many people's lives are being ruined not just by getting AIDS but by the cultural backlash of the epidemic, to refuse to participate in a cultural event which is so politically charged, to decide it doesn't apply to you, is very strange and wrong.

It is precisely this kind of understanding of the cultural construction of AIDS within the context of a major swing to the right in US politics that is missing

from Schwartz's otherwise important account.

Like a Sarah Schulman novel, *Sisters, Sexperts, Queers* is full of young, urban dykes in black leather and Chanel red lipstick shouting "Get used to it!" on their way to an ACT UP meeting or a screening of lesbian porn. At times you wonder, as Maggenti does, whether they "have any cogent analysis of where they stand in the world except that everyone should own a black bra." At other points, the writing is a real breath of fresh air for any dyke who has ever felt like a resident alien in the Lesbian Nation. Despite its limitations, *Sisters, Sexperts, Queers* is fun, provocative and - best of all - risk-taking.

Cynthia Wright is a Toronto writer and historian of mid-twentieth century shopping culture.

No More Confessions

BY Francisco Ibañez-Carrasco

Proust, Cole Porter, Michelangelo, Marc Almond and Me: Writings by Gay Men on their lives and Lifestyles. National Lesbian and Gay Survey. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Proust, Cole Porter, Michelangelo, Marc Almond and Me is a collection of "writings by Gay men on their lives and lifestyles." Its 195 pages are divided into eight sections; every section presents a specific theme preceded by intriguing titles such as "pride", "virus", "law", and "together." It is difficult to situate this book in a specific field such as anthropology or ethnomethodology. It is difficult to call it "journalistic" or to call it "fictional." This ambiguous location is symptomatic of this collection's inability to meet some of what have become basic standards in the burgeoning field of lesbian and gay writing. We queers are not easily pleased anymore with a book that is ambiguously sexy, scientific, informative or controversial.

The information presented in *Proust, Cole Porter...* was gathered by means of a "Mass Observation" project conducted through the 1980s. This pro-

ject involved gays and lesbians writing and submitting "reports on a wide range of issues pertinent to gay and lesbian life." Written material for the volume was apparently obtained by sending out "quarterly directives...(comprised of) a series of suggestions of areas the volunteers might care to cover within a given topic." The editors then claim to have been successful in collecting the "feelings and opinions of persons in the street on major issues." Once collected the written texts sent by "volunteer authors" were "logged and placed in the collection," "no censorship was exercised," and the editors state that they made "no attempt to draw conclusions."

The methodology employed in the collection of information for this volume betrays an authoritarian form of editorial control, control that runs the risk of being exploitative of those who participate in the project. There are many questions left unanswered: who controlled the production of textual material? Who determined what topics were addressed? Why were these topics of special interest or importance? We are reassured that "(the editors) have attempted to make the material as assimilable as possible." Assimilable? Who did they have in mind? The excerpts have been selected, chopped and arranged according to a few individuals' criteria. Usually lesbian and gay work works toward the ideal of democratic praxis. This praxis is sorely lacking here. Indeed it seems the authors feel more indebted to traditional social scientific method than to any kind of empowering political praxis. This project, intended to be the formation of an archive "so that researchers of the future might understand what it was like to live as a (white, English?) homosexual in the late twentieth century," pursues its goal rather clumsily, overburdened as it is with unexamined methodological assumptions.

Proust, Cole Porter... contributes greatly to the confusion between biographies, autobiographies, memoirs and testimonials. Let's look at one aspect of this confusion: biography tends to be defined as a literary genre that deals with the lives and deeds of

individuals considered interesting, influential or unique. As Doris Sommer notes in her essay "Rigoberta's Secrets" it "is precisely that genre which insists on singularity." Subjects of "bios" might claim that they truly represent their type or class, but, eventually, they have to face the simple limit(ation) of singularity: the fact that a peer can say "I don't look or act like that at all!"

The difference between biographies and testimonials is more one of *intent* than *form*. Biographies (with their ghost writers) are the result of individual work and their intent is largely self-serving. Bios may be exemplary (like the lives of catholic saints), but they are not necessarily "representative" in the politically queer sense of the concept. Testimonials (used interchangeably but not unproblematically with testimony, oral history, life history and autobiography) are a result of some form of (self) enquiry conducted within various contexts (e.g. feminist research, critical ethnography, anthropology) generally between individuals who are situated in symmetrical positions of power. The intent of testimonials is didactic (like the *Odyssey* and the *Illiad* were) and political (to advocate, denounce, demand). Testimonials crack open the tragic capsule of the binary between private/public. They subvert its apparent determinacy. Personal narratives like the well-known *I...Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (Burgos-Debray, ed. 1984) maintain a delicate balance between explaining personal circumstances and feelings and having them stand for some universal experiences of oppression and liberation. Sommers explains that "(Rigoberta's) singularity achieves her identity as an extension of the collective. The singular represents the plural not because it replaces or subsumes the group but because the speaker is a distinguishable part of the whole" (1988: 108). Paul Monette partially achieves this "effect" in *Borrowed Time* (1988) and *Becoming a Man* (1992). Michael Kalin works within the testimonial tradition in *Surviving AIDS* (1990) in which he interviews other "witnesses."

One could say that testimonials are politically aware biographies. They are not to be confused with confessions in which the writer/speaker usually occupies a subordinate position. Testimonials are likely to be precedent-setting experiences, what Paulo Freire calls "speaking the world and the word." They are informed by raw experiences. They are likely to have been "performed live," many times before the interest or conditions were energized to give them written form. In AIDS prevention education this format has shown many educational possibilities: it can be a moment of reflection and awareness-raising in which contents, attitudes and behaviours are reflected and acted upon.

Differences between biographies and testimonials may have significant impact on queer representation and in the ongoing saga of our "becoming". A number of written texts that clearly "bear witness" to the difference across the sexual, gender, ethnic and class axis have been widely recognized. Works such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour* (Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1981), *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (Beam, ed., 1986), and *Gay Men's Life Stories* (Hall Carpenter Archives Gay Men's Oral History Group, 1989) come to mind. And there is much, much more, new and old, black and white, individual and collective (see Abelow, Aina Barale and Halperin, eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* 1993). But *Proust, Cole Porter...* does not fit comfortably into any of these categories. It does not contribute to breaking silences. *Proust, Cole Porter...* does not encourage a better understanding of who gays are. It almost exclusively presents the voices of white English males. This renders the collection of "reports" culturally unintelligible and unable to effectively travel across the ocean to North America and across cultures to many readers.

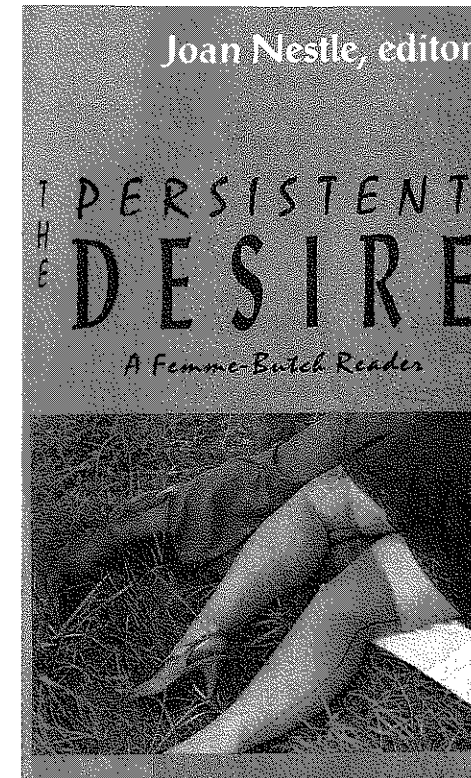
Finally, and just so you understand how bitter I am about this book, I have a comment to make about the "Virus" section of this volume. As usual, the issue of AIDS becomes the necessary addition, appendix, and accessory to any queer

piece. I cannot tell you how many T-Cells I burn squirming through pages like these. In my work in the AIDS community I have observed that many gay men find AIDS stories tedious. The courage and tragedy of the epidemic among gay men is legitimate but it is wasted in objectionable formats. In biographies the author has the opportunity to explain in detail how, why, and when the virus entered his body and his life. In testimonials emphasis is given to the universal aspects of one person's individual experience. Themes such as "contamination", "fear of intimacy", "second coming out", and others are endlessly repeated. They come to function as mnemonic devices for audiences as we search our social memories for the meaning of the AIDS tragedy and attempt to identify the important things to remember and pass on to the next generation. But in *Proust, Cole Porter...* the stories about the "virus" seem to function more as confessions than anything else. The confusion between testimonials and confessions has been detrimental in the area of AIDS education and politics. Confessions create victims that are either innocent or guilty (read: men who get it up the ass). Cindy Patton, in her essay "Tremble, Hetero Swine!", cautions us to be wary of the identities created by the "new right" that "cloister self-revelation" and "reinterpret proud gay speech as confessions to the distinctive perversion that gay liberation's reversal ought to expose as fraud." AIDS confessions are a luxury that we cannot afford any longer if we want to break free from systemic clinical and legal oppressions. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub point out in their collection, *Testimony*, "through the illusion of understanding [confessions] provide, (allow us) to forgive and forget."

Unfortunately, *Proust, Cole Porter...* can easily be misread as a trivial book of fag stories. It resembles night-time radio talk shows where "troubled" night owls' misfortunes are packaged in a pop-psych, diminishing format. It is not that we have had enough stories of gay men. The point is that we queers need to be

very aware of how we are telling our stories, how we are being made into "text" and sold to ourselves between the covers. This is not an easy task; as we well know, minorities have to work extra hard to be heard and not be misunderstood.

Francisco Ibañez-Carrasco is a freelance writer and AIDS educator living in Vancouver.



Dykes and Dicks

BY Gretchen Zimmerman

Ed. Joan Nestle, *The Persistent Desire: A Femme/Butch Reader*, Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992.

The one consistent refrain in *The Persistent Desire* is if it feels good, do it, or rather, if the dildo fits, wear it. The other recurring motif coincides with the queer notions, "we're here, we're queer, get used to it," or "we're

femme, we're butch, fuck you very much." *The Persistent Desire*, subtitled *A Femme-Butch Reader* by Joan Nestle, (*femme extraordinaire*, lover of butch women, and co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York) offers a refreshing, reassuring and revolutionary look at a once taboo topic: butch/femme.

The butch/femme roles that were popular among lesbians in the 50's are coming back, but this time they have a new identity, a wild profundity, and a renewed sensibility. This new awareness includes a rejection of the heteropatriarchal notion that a butch wants to be a man, and is therefore a dysfunctional wo/man, and a firm denial that femmes are misplaced straight laced ladies. Simultaneously this new sensibility provides proof of a renewed strength and pride in butch/femme play.

Today there is a reclaiming of roles among butch/femme lesbians, roles that were made almost totally invisible in the 70s. Far from welcoming what it saw as heterosexual 'role reproduction', the re-emerging women's liberation movement rejected outright, silenced and un/intentionally marginalized butch/femme pairings and displays. Even though the work boot clad, flannel shirted dyke represented an "in your face" rebuttal of patriarchy and capitalism (which was seen as positive), if she bedded down with a femme (read: a female cop-out), then she betrayed her feminist sisters in the worst possible sense. The mostly straight, white, able-bodied feminist movement judged butch-femme relations as a direct mirroring of the inequitable heterosexual dynamic. But of course this was not really what was happening.

These 50s butch/femme women were surviving the best way they knew how in a straight, hate filled universe. As contributor Leslie Feinberg writes, "when the bigots came in, it was time to fight, and fight we did. We fought hard, butch and femme..." These butches were tough and strong; they had to be to survive.