

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.

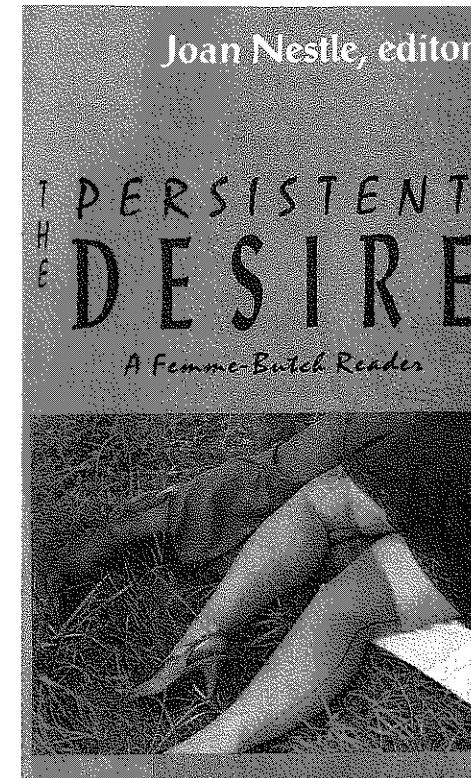
Finally, and just so you understand how bitter I am about this book, I have a comment to make about the "Virus" section of this volume. As usual, the issue of AIDS becomes the necessary addition, appendix, and accessory to any queer

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.

Femmes as well were expressing their own unique way of being in the world. Joan Nestle writes on being a 50s femme: "Oh, we had our styles - our outfits, our perfumes, our performances - and we could lose ourselves under the chins of our dancing partners." Partners indeed.

Just as disruptive, but not as well represented in *The Persistent Desire* are the voices of butches and femmes of colour. An article from *Jet* magazine in 1954 describes lesbians as 'part-time' men, who "for various reasons reject feminine roles and, while retaining female trappings, compete with men for jobs - and other women." Countering this historically interesting, yet judgemental article, is an excerpt from "Tar Beach" by Audre Lorde. Lorde writes of the way 'gay-girls' dressed and 'semi-dressed,' claiming that "Clothes were often the most important or only way of broadcasting one's chosen sexual role." Other contributing women of colour include Chea Villanueva, Kitty Tsui, and Jewelle L. Gomez. Tsui writes: "Sure, I wrote love poems, but I never wrote about sex. I was, after all, a nice Chinese girl and we didn't talk about things like that." Now she does.

Butch/femme women are once again at the lesbian forefront, claiming as Arlene Stein does that "roles are enjoying a renaissance among younger dykes, women who never fully parted with their butch and femme identities." Current butch-femme identities are being reclaimed by younger dykes with a new sense of erotic play - a departure from the 50's-style rebellion and survival.

The new butches and femmes are adopting signifiers more out of play than necessity. This play involves a more fluid definition of what it means to be a femme or a butch. 50's femmes would likely never have been caught dead switching roles with a butch, or going out of the house without the proper shade of passion pink lipstick. A 50's butch would not willingly wear a dress (in any comfortable manner), unless per-

haps she had to go to court to defend the charge of impersonating a man. Today's butch/femme lesbians are more comfortable with transgressing dress codes, switching roles, playing the 'other' part, the top, the bottom, or playing both roles at once

Likewise with today's new role adaptation one might find two butches pairing off or two femmes together trying to 'outfemme' the other.

Upon reading *The Femme/Butch Reader*, one could also say that there is a deconstruction of the 50's butch/femme by the new butch/femme which takes place through what Arlene Stein calls "refusing ghettoization, acknowledging internal group differences, and affirming the value of individual choice when it comes to style and political and sexual expression." Sounds like a lesbian utopia. The downside of this, however, says Stein, is the potential to 'depoliticize' lesbian identity, thus blurring the boundaries of the 'what it is' (the thisness) of being lesbian.

For 50's butch-femme women, blurring the boundaries was a way of life. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madelaine Davis chronicle this blurring: "They was no one to mess with": The construction of the butch role in the lesbian community of the 1940s and 50s." They argue that while there were similarities between butch-femme pairings and heterosexual unions, mainly in terms of gender polarity, there were also many unique aspects to butch-femme. One aspect of this uniqueness included the way in which women were allowed to be sexual. "In the 1950's, lesbian culture, and lesbians' resulting consciousness and sense of pride had developed sufficiently to enable all of its members to leave their traditional women's upbringing and embrace new sexual attitudes and practices." Kennedy and Davis also discuss the absence of camp among 50's butch-femme women. One hears so much about gay men camping it up, but very little about a lesbian camp tradition. In answer to the question of why lesbian

camp never took hold, the authors write: "The structures of oppression were such that lesbians never really escaped from male supremacy. In lesbians' actual struggle in the bars or on the streets, authority was always male." Fighting for one's life as a woman did not square neatly with sending up masculinity for laughs.

Each essay, poem, taped interview and short-story in *The Persistent Desire* recalls the strength, courage, pride and determination of each individual femme and butch. All the contributions describe the struggle to define a lesbian way of life, and to invent new forms of culture. By rejecting society's strict definition of femininity and womanhood in the 1950s and 1960, butches and femmes defined what it meant to be a lesbian, and redefined what it meant to be a woman. Today, butch/femme individuals are also redefining how feminine and masculine roles are appropriated and played-out, by affirming that women can be one or the other, or neither or both, or any variation thereof, along with the affirmation that both roles are equal.

An aspect of lesbian culture that the femme/butch reader touches upon and intends to challenge is the notion that a dyke wearing a 'dick', a dildo, is still a dyke, and not a wanna-be man. In "Sex, Lies And Penetration: A Butch Finally Fesses Up," Jan Brown discusses the "dildo dilemma" in terms of her own past experience. She speaks of the taboo that many lesbians in the 90s place on penetration between two women, claiming, as the myth declares, that there is an obvious heterosexual copy-cattling. The underlying premise is that "penetration equals oppression." As Brown tells us, these are all lies. Lesbians have been using dildos for longer than most can imagine, more than we care to admit, and will not stop under accusation or threat.

According to more than one author, women who wore dildos or who slept with women who wore dildos kept the secret to themselves and the dildo well hidden under the bed,

or in the closet. But closets are for clothes, not dildos. Suddenly, bravely, dildo strapping lesbians were coming out of the closet, quite literally: dildo in hand—or is that on hip?—they were proud. They were also wondering why some of their sisters turned both eyes and ears away, leaving the honest dildo wearing dykes to fend for themselves. (As if they hadn't done this already). Dildo wearing dykes were no longer confused or embarrassed, they were free, proud and relieved; they were also unwillingly placed in the position to answer a lot of (dumb) questions, like is a dildo a penis substitute?

With respect to 'explaining' the difference between a dildo and a real live penis (assuming that this is difficult to discern), Brown says: "Our answer was to explain that dildos were absolutely lesbian. They were our heritage and history, a link with those who had bravely gone before. Dildos did not represent the penis.

Couldn't we take ours off and put it in the drawer? It was a removable object purely for pleasure and did not endow its wearer with any innate ability to keep its recipient barefoot, in the kitchen and oppressed." Perhaps the sound of a dildo being strapped on is what Radclyffe Hall really meant to write about when she wrote, in "The Well of Loneliness," "that night they were not divided." Brown says it more directly: "Because we are dykes, we want a dyke on the other end of that cock."

Barbara Smith also problematizes the 'penis-substitute' myth when she writes: "I can fuck my lover with my cock...I can take it off and fuck myself with it, or she can fuck me with it. Tell me how many men can castrate themselves, bugger themselves with their own cocks, fellate their own cocks attached to someone else's body, take their cocks off, put them in a drawer and forget about them - all this and not bleed to

death?" Indeed.

There are many voices in *The Persistent Desire*: many stories, many memories (both good and bad), and many lives lived, either as a femme or as a butch. The one thing that all of these stories have in common is desire: a desire for other women, a desire to be desired by other women and an even stronger desire for butch/femme to continue as a valid, healthy and exciting way of life. These stories and the women behind them are living proof that, in Joan Nestle's words, "Butch/femme relationships (are) complex erotic and social statements, not phony heterosexual replicas." They (are) filled with a deeply lesbian language of stance, dress, gesture, love, courage, and autonomy.

Gretchen Zimmerman is a writer and bookstore worker in Waterloo, Ontario.


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