

century feminists, for example, divided on the issues of individual rights and social responsibility, are credited with achieving a "stereographic or double-lensed view, bringing reality into three-dimensional focus."

Occasionally the metaphor itself threatens to overwhelm the thought. Noting the impact of advertising upon the homemaker of the 1930s, Cott writes, "advertisers drew arms and ammunition of scientific credibility from the stockpiles provided by the social sciences, and the conflicted definition of the modern woman provided ample terrain for psychological battle." Her sense, however, of the importance of fact, of telling detail, more than compensates for an overblown

metaphor. Recognizing that young women were particularly pressured to define their own place in society at the beginning of this century, she hits upon a convincing statistic: "more than a quarter of all the American women born in the first decade of the twentieth century, those who came of age in the 1920s, never bore children, despite the waxing marriage rate." Writing of those women who did bear children, but who were not employed outside the home, Cott registers the truth of the situation by letting a variety of women speak, each in her own style. She includes the Irish wife of a carpenter who begins "don't you think I'm not a-wanting to do my share...;" she registers the protests of a middle-aged

woman with a college education behind her, and the wife of a teacher, each of whom recognizes that the 'price' of being provided for is self-respect.

The integrity of Cott's study depends in large part on her holding to the terms of her thesis, on her respect for the individual voice, on her respect for difference in sameness. Summarizing twenty years of women's politics, Cott does not assert anything like solidarity, but rather affirms a "vital ambivalence." "Without coalescing into one movement, without mobilizing the mass, and often declining the label feminist, individual and group efforts nonetheless sparked again and again." Late twentieth-century feminists may do well to read by that flickering light.

## BODY INVADERS: Panic Sex in America

Edited and introduced by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker. Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1987.

*Lisa Moore*

*Body Invaders* is a collection of loosely-linked essays that explores the reconstruction of the body in postmodern culture and/or the construction of the postmodern body. These latter terms are constantly renegotiated throughout the volume: the writers spar with easy definitions to produce an enriched, if uncomfortably bruised and bleeding, sense of what it is to live in a body in the postmodern age. We live in a time when representations of the human body are more attractive, more powerful than the human body itself. Indeed, with the advent of reproductive technology, the crusade for fetal rights, and the increased use of organ transplants from animals, it is often impossible to tell just what constitutes "humanity." We who live in postmodern bodies are disconnected from our own flesh and from the communities that might help define it by the exigencies of mass reproduction. We see too many images of what we ought to be to be able to tell what we are.

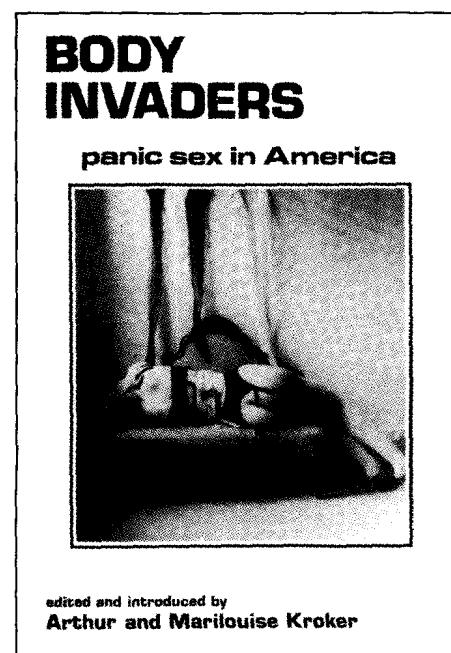
Since the postmodern epoch is characterized by the domination of visual images produced by the media, the printed word is a somewhat anachronistic method of exploring it. The editors of *Body Invaders* have attempted to account for this

incongruity by including photo essays, stills from videos, and graphic designs throughout the volume, and by including essays that experiment with dream narratives and dialogues.

In the context of this postmodern multimedia play between fiction and fact, word and image, it is interesting that one of the most sophisticated and moving essays is Eileen Manion's "A Ms.-Managed Womb," a relatively straightforward analytic piece written in clear, vigorous prose. Manion identifies a crucial contradiction in feminist responses to innovations in reproductive technology: that in rescuing women's individualism from coercive institutions like "the family," we distract attention from our efforts at

community-building. The language of the abortion debate, with its emphasis on women's individual choice, is a good example of how feminist principles of community get muddled in discussions of reproductive issues. We have attempted to wrest control over our bodies from individual men and from the patriarchal church and state, but "this revolt against the notion of the body as male property has left us with the idea that the body is our property." This view, Manion claims, "leaves something to be desired — namely the element of the social." This fundamental contradiction has crippled feminist analysis of reproductive rights as a system, confining our politics to single-issue fights without an analytic context from which to establish priorities. Manion points out that feminists must become more involved with public policy-making on these issues because the rapid expansion of reproductive technologies could mean that we find our bodies spoken for before our politics can prevent it. Rather than either "perfecting" these technologies or outlawing them, Manion argues, "what we need is more creative thinking about social possibilities" they open up. Instead of using technology to produce the increasingly elusive fantasy TV family, we should use it as an occasion to ponder what kind of "families" feminists want, and whether we really need science to create them.

Another outstanding essay in this collection is also written from a feminist perspective. Kim Sawchuk's "A Tale of Inscription/Fashion Statements" is a



beautifully-written and trenchant analysis of the contradictory possibilities the fashion industry poses for women. She rejects the prevailing view of feminist and Marxist cultural critics of fashion as “a reflection of the social onto the body, fashion as the repression of the natural body; fashion simply as a commodity to be resisted; fashion as substitute for the missing phallus.” These claims rest on simple notions of a “natural” body that exists prior to its social construction, and that is deformed and rendered oppressed by that construction; if the oppressive social codes were removed, the “natural” body would be revealed and liberated. But Sawchuk argues that “an anti-fashion discourse cannot be assumed to be inherently feminist.” Such discourses often depend upon misogynist views of women as too stupid to resist the blandishments of Madison Avenue, and/or have a hidden agenda in which women’s potentially subversive sexuality, insisted upon by fashionable clothing, is to be denied. Sawchuk wants to insist on the *pleasure* that women get from clothing:

*The acts of shopping, of wearing an article of clothing, of receiving clothing as a gift, can be expressions of recognition and love between women, or between women and men, which should not be ignored, though they may fail to transcend the dominant phallic economy of desire.*

Fashion, then, is neither inherently oppressive nor inherently liberating. It is “contradictory for women,” and in that very contradiction lies the possibility of using it to push the boundaries of acceptable feminine sexuality.

Because these feminist essays are specifically concerned with the bodies of women, they avoid one of the major problems of this book and of any theoretical

investigation of “the body.” It seems to me that discussions of “the body” as an ungendered, neutral entity too easily slide into the assumption that it is male. For example, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker’s essay, “Theses on the Disappearing Body in the Hyper-Modern Condition,” seeks to “emphasize the fact that the (natural) body in the postmodern condition has *already* disappeared.” This statement assumes, with most contemporary feminist theory (including Kim Sawchuk above), that the body, like gender, is socially constructed rather than an unchangeable biological entity. Yet the authors devote one paragraph specifically to women’s bodies, which they claim “have always been postmodern because they have always been targets of....power.” (There is, of course, no specific reference to men’s bodies.) If women’s bodies must be discussed separately, then “the body” must be male in its abstract form. (If a body can be something other than male or female, as Monique Wittig argues in “The Straight Mind,” the possibility is not explored here.) Despite their theoretical disclaimers of “naturalness,” the Krokers have fallen back on the assumption that there is an unchangeable, or at least, abstractable, state of the body and that women’s bodies are the occasional exception to this general condition. Many of the other essays work on the same assumption, and indeed, I think it is difficult to avoid for any theory which takes “the body” as its object of study. Postmodern theorists would do well to note Adrienne Rich’s words, quoted by Elspeth Probyn in “The Anorexic Body:” “To say ‘the body’ lifts me away from what has given me a primary perspective. To say ‘my body’ reduces the temptation to grandiose assertions.”

Grandiose assertions, of course, are what postmodern theory does best. Per-

haps because it insists on our contemporary isolation from history, writing such as this often insists disturbingly on the significance of current dilemmas. Not since the seventeenth-century millenarians have we heard such doomsaying as the editors’ assertion that “what follows is body writing for the end of the world” or Baudrillard’s notion of “the disappearance of history,” in which “history can no longer surpass itself, it can no longer envisage its own finality, dream its own end.” Because these claims seem inflated, even hysterical, I am tempted to dismiss them as insufficiently historical, mere navel-gazing. But a feminist writer not represented in *Body Invaders*, Christina Thurmer-Rohr, reminds us that “the patriarchal wish for omnipotence and total control has stepped out of the realm of mere fantasy, fiction and experiment into the realm of complete realizability.”<sup>1</sup> What Thurmer-Rohr calls “the worldwide escalation of nuclear, chemical and biological means of annihilation” set our era apart definitively from the past. Nonetheless, seeing this difference clearly and facing the inevitable, daily anxiety it engenders can distract us from the political action that postmodern theory, with its recognition of the power of the media and the complex functioning of ideology, can also make possible. Fortunately, many of the essays in *Body Invaders* (most notably those by feminists) manifest a specific political agenda that is all the more effective because it is grounded in a sophisticated theoretical understanding of the dilemmas, temptations and possibilities of this era of late capitalism, high patriarchy, and nuclear terrorism — in sum, the postmodern condition.

<sup>1</sup>Christina Thurmer-Rohr, “From Deception to Un-Deception: On Complicity of Women,” *Trivia* 12 (Spring 1988), p.63.

## A WOMAN’S HISTORY OF SEX

Harriett Gilbert and Christine Roche.  
London: Pandora, 1988.

### Carol Greene

Harriett Gilbert and Christine Roche’s *A Women’s History of Sex* has what so few other feminist studies have — humour!

The book is a tongue-in-cheek look at

the ways women’s sexuality has been controlled or has been the target of attempted control in history.

Gilbert’s writing style and Roche’s illustrations are perfect complements. Both are intelligently funny and discretely indiscreet. The text is wide in scope and succinctly written, yet there is no economy of laughs. Bold statements, titillating trivia and a personal voice give the reader a sense that she’s sharing an uproarious laugh with a friend.

In the opening chronology, “Momentous Moments,” Gilbert lists some milestones in our sexual past. We learn that Sappho of Lesbos wrote lyric poems in praise of love, lust and women in 6th century BC; that the bidet was invented to serve the growing popularity of oral sex in 17th-century France; and that in 1947 Dr. Helena Wright first challenged the ‘efficacy of the penis-vagina combination’ in producing orgasms for women.

The text reveals the origins of misog-