

# Book Reviews

## THE HOUSE THAT JILL BUILT: A LESBIAN NATION IN FORMATION

Becki L. Ross. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995.

by Susan G. Cole

Recently, the Toronto Historical Board was the site of a panel on lesbian feminism in the '70s as part of the Pass It On series of events uncovering gay and lesbian history. I and two other long-time activists participated in a spirited discussion that ultimately took us down a surprising path. For when we were asked to reflect on lesbian feminism in the '70s and its meaning in the '90s—From Dogma to Dildoes was the evening's provocative title—we came to the conclusion that we weren't quite sure what lesbian feminism was, or whether it ever really existed.

All of us on the panel—the others were Amy Gottlieb and Eve Zaremba—took to the streets in the '70s through specifically feminist organizations like the International Women's Day Coalition or Women Against Violence Against Women. Zaremba and I were also active on the Broadside collective, which published a feminist monthly. As we remembered it, our activism in lesbian organizations—particularly the Lesbian Organization of Toronto (LOOT)—was a logical extension of our feminist politics. Insisting on the right to love women dovetailed with the principle that we should have control over our bodies and lesbian practice kept us out of the bed of the "enemy," but almost all of that and everything else we could think of spelled radical- or socialist-feminist.

For my part, the most important aspect of my association with LOOT

was the co-founding of the lesbian rock band Mama Quilla II. Indeed, many of us suspected that the best part of lesbian organizing was—you guessed it—the dances.

Which is to say that we panelists got the lesbian-feminist part of it, but the "ism" was far more elusive.

Here's where Becki Ross's new book, *The House That Jill Built*, is extremely useful. It will no doubt suffer from the no-win situation syndrome that goes with producing a first book on a neglected subject—it cannot be all things to all people. But it does grapple with the problem of defining lesbian feminism—not as abstract, but as a lived politic. Through interviews, articles published in the gay and lesbian press at the time, and archival recordings of key meetings, Ross takes us back to the first gathering of 60 women in 1976 at the Canadian Homophile Association in Toronto, the founding of LOOT, the development of the LOOT centre at 342 Jarvis, and its disintegration by 1980.

Ross discusses how this movement grew out of disaffection with male-centred gay-liberation and lesbo-phobic mainstream feminism. It was also spawned by dissatisfaction with liberal organizations like the Daughters of Bilitis who sought lesbian rights because, they believed, dykes were really just like everybody else. That wasn't us, we said at LOOT. We valued collectivity in a hierarchical culture and our personal presentations defied conventional codes of femininity. And besides, we did develop a certain chauvinism about the virtues of lesbian life. We weren't like everybody else—we were better. Indeed, the ideological heartbeat of lesbian feminism, according to Ross's chronicle, is a new-found pride in lesbianism and a growing understanding of the meaning of community and its ability to nourish us.

Told in the context of a number of crucial political developments of the time—the bust of the *Body Politic* for publishing the article "Men Loving Boys Loving Men," the arrival of anti-gay activist Anita Bryant to Toronto, among them—and dropping the names of practically every activist who drew a breath inside 342 Jarvis, *The House That Jill Built* helps to tease out the differences between political streams in the '70s while respecting the commitment and energy of women who were charting new territory.

But don't for a second confuse this book with history. Activists of the day had multiple political affiliations and sometimes Ross gets confused about the locus of certain activities. I've talked to at least three people who have said that Ross got their political connections wrong. I can only be sure about my own case. The fact that Ross reports that Mama Quilla II lasted three years and then died, when in fact Mama Quilla thrived into the '80s and released an influential record, makes me worry about the historical accuracy of other bald statements made by the author.

And don't look for the confrontational book Ross might have written. As the first Ph.D. in Lesbian Studies at OISE, Ross has been a pioneer in queer theory and in developing a so-called pro-sex gay sexual politic that is counterposed against radical feminist politics that oppose pornography and fight systems of violence and control in sexuality. It looked like Ross was on her way to a completely different treatment of the material when she published a working paper in *FUSE* magazine two years ago. It contained a blistering attack on LOOT and the lesbian-feminist impulse, claiming they defied diversity—in style as in sex—alienated sex workers and abandoned sex in general. In making the argument, Ross reduced lesbian feminists to two-dimensional cartoons.

The piece obviously triggered a reaction from somebody—either her advisors or her subjects, or both—because she's de-emphasized the rhetoric significantly. If anything the tone of the book has been weirdly flattened out. Where previously, quotes came in small bytes and without much context, now they spew out largely undigested, and multiple points of view mingle in such a way that one wishes Ross would cut through it all with some of the hard analysis she's known for.

And though Ross reports that most of us were in our late 20s, she cannot possibly appreciate how young we all were at the time. I don't mean that our ideas had that passionate and angry teenage edge, which they did—but that we as women, as beings in the world, were about as developed as our emerging politics—which is to say, not much. Though Ross does ask a few activists what they're up to 20 years later, a more thorough survey would have shown how involvement in LOOT set the stage for a lot of career choices and pursuits. Many of those who staffed the phone lines at LOOT, like Rosemary Barnes, for example, went on to become skilled professional counsellors either in hospitals or women's services. And while Ross laments that only two of the hundreds of women who passed through LOOT's doors were out lesbians, that's changed now, as was readily apparent from the panel at the historical board. I've written a play about lesbian motherhood, Eve Zaremba is the high-profile creator of the dyke detective Helen Keremos and both Amy Gottlieb and I, as lesbian mothers, are organizing to empower lesbian families. We wouldn't have done it without our LOOT background.

But did I mention how first books about neglected subjects can't be all things to all people? *The House That Jill Built* makes a huge contribution, honouring lesbian history and making vivid moments that would otherwise have remained only in our collective memory. So do have a look.

Because, if you were around at the time, you're probably in it.

## LESBIAN CHOICES

Claudia Card. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

by *Philinda Masters*

*Lesbian Choices* is Claudia Card's philosophical exploration of the meaning of "choice" in lesbian self-determination. However, far from being an exercise in abstraction, Card's work is firmly grounded in the actuality of lesbian lives (her own included). In discussing the meaning of choice for lesbians, she also looks at the implications of various choices and, in the process, explores the meaning of "lesbian," lesbian culture, and lesbian ethics. She draws on, and builds on, the work of other lesbian philosophers (Sarah Hoagland, Marilyn Frye, Janice Raymond, Adrienne Rich) as well as some eminent patriarchs (Aristotle, Hegel, William James, Foucault).

The book is organized into three sections: "Constructing Ourselves," "Lesbians in Relationships: Ups and Downs," and "Coming Out: Issues in a Wider Society." Although only one chapter (in Part One) is entitled "Lesbian Ethics," Claudia Card is concerned throughout with the ethical considerations of, among other things, lesbian separatism, homophobia, horizontal abuse, and the politics of outing.

Card begins her exploration by discussing a course she teaches at the University of Wisconsin on lesbian culture. "Teaching lesbian culture," she says, "means teaching detecting work... teaching how to identify what has been deliberately censored or encoded." She presents several historical models for lesbian identity, or "essence" (Amazons, Sapphists, and passionate friends), which helps students understand the varied meanings of culture and lesbian choice. Drawing on theories of genealogy and "family resemblances," and looking at the essentialist *vs.* social constructionist nature of identity poli-

tics, Card concludes that the principles around which lesbians organize our lives are those which distinguish us as lesbians and the integrity of the relationships we choose to create.

What distinguishes us as lesbians, according to Simone de Beauvoir, is that we are not "women," who are by definition heterosexual. De Beauvoir saw lesbianism as a choice, a radical position for the time, but she was unable to recognize a basic contradiction in her thinking, that if lesbianism is a choice for women, what about heterosexuality? Going beyond de Beauvoir's notion of "attitudinal" choice ("an attitude chosen in a certain situation"), Card discusses the meaning of choice within the current discourse of lesbian ethics. Card asks if it is possible for some women *not* to choose to be lesbian, given a particular moral and philosophical (or political) understanding of society, and suggests that social construction adds complexities to the question of "choice," in particular the interaction of individuals with institutions which both create and restrict individual options.

With respect to lesbian ethics, after reviewing the work of Sarah Hoagland and Marilyn Frye in particular, Card asserts that lesbian ethics is not a blend of politics and ethical values (Hoagland), although the line between politics and ethics is a fine one, nor is it simply a theory of agency (Hoagland, Frye). Rather, lesbian ethics concerns itself with what promotes the establishment of healthy lesbian communities and defines the conditions for women-loving.

In looking at models for those communities and conditions, Card adopts an Aristotelian approach to friends and relationships (friendships of pleasure, utility, and excellence), and suggests that lack of community roots and traditions creates a problem for lesbians in establishing a healthy social environment. So too does the denial of deep hostility which is the product of a misogynist culture, and which results in a society, both lesbian and mainstream, that has not adequately dealt with lesbian batter-