

BOOKS

When do opposites attract?

A new anthology explores intersexual intersections and raises eyebrows as well as questions

BY SUSAN K. RAFFO

We are part of a movement that makes assumptions about connection from the very beginning. Community is assumed by what we call ourselves: the gay and lesbian community, the queer movement, and the gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans community. How much do we all actually have in common? How much do gay men and lesbians, in particular, have in common and how often do we truly talk to each other?

In their new anthology, *Opposite Sex: Gay Men on Lesbians, Lesbians on Gay Men*, Sara Miles and Eric Rofes explore these and other questions by offering up a selection of gay men writing about lesbian bodies, sex and sex cultures, and of lesbians writing about gay men's bodies, sex and sex cultures. Various identified as lesbian, bisexual, gay, trans and queer, the contributors both challenge and blur the lines between assorted queer identities by examining the interplay found in their individual lives and histories.

Miles explains, "I can see lots of ways that different gay male cultures, and my intimate relationships with particular gay men, have influenced my verbal style, sense of humor, moral values and sexuality over the years. I can also see how hard it is to chart the influences in anyone's life schematically, or know with precision where the boundaries of one culture end and another culture's begin."

Opposite Sex was first the idea of Rofes: "For several years I co-facilitated a workshop at the NGLTF [National Gay and Lesbian Task Force] Creating Change Conference called variously 'Sex Cross-Talk' and 'The Ick Factor.' Dreamed up by Sue Hyde and Urvashi Vaid, it was a space for men and women to talk sex together and, most particularly, to talk about the other sex."

When Rofes was approached by a New York University Press editor who was curious to know about his future projects, Rofes immediately thought of a book based on the workshops. Rofes linked up with Miles to co-edit the book, which meant jumping directly into the very areas between gay men and lesbians that the book intended to examine.

"Since Eric was well-known as a political activist, an aspiring theory head and a big bad top who'd done most of the men in town, I expected him to be a kind of cutting-edge, avant-garde sex radical who'd embody all the rebelliousness, daring and excess of gay male culture," Miles remembers. "It was a little disturbing the first time I went to his apartment and saw the Cris Williamson records."

In the introduction to *Opposite Sex*, the editors discuss the reluctance they encountered in getting queer writers who may have waxed at lyrical length about their personal sexualities to focus equal attention on the opposite gender's

sexual culture. This reluctance seemed to vary in style according to the gender of the individual.

"As I worked on this book, a lot of my male pals—fellow habitués of leather bars, sex clubs and bear scenes—marveled at my interest in lesbian sex and had a hard time making sense of this," Rofes says of the responses he encountered. "Lesbians, they believe, play no role in

ty' and urging men to avoid multiple partners."

Gay men use lesbians and lesbians use gay men, each to describe or decry specific elements within their home culture. Rofes, describing one example of this, says, "Some gay men seem envious of what they see as the powerful 'romance' that suffuses lesbian relations." This envy is particularly present within the current gay culture wars and sex panic to a



Eric Rofes (left) and Sara Miles

their sexuality or their sex practices. My lesbian friends found the project intriguing and did not express similar shock at the project."

The reason for this, says Miles, is not surprising: "I don't think it's complicated—it's the same reason that straight men pay less attention to figuring out how women think than straight women do to understanding men. Men don't pay attention to women because they don't have to. It's the bright side of being a member of a subordinate group: You get smarter because your survival depends on understanding what the dominant group is up to."

It is not empty rhetoric to say we have a lot to learn from each other. "Individuals as well as cultures place different values on being in control or out of control in sex," Miles says. "One of the most interesting moments for me in the book was in the piece, 'If Two Men Are Having Lesbian Sex Together.' One of the authors described the moment during the 1980s when a lesbian discourse about sex emerged that enthusiastically embraced risk, danger and non-monogamy, just as, at the same moment, the gay male discourse on sex was filling with phrases like 'risk reduction' and 'safe-

point in which lesbian life and culture often becomes white-picket-fenced out of its complexities."

Addressing the same issues, Miles explains, "I also want to say it's a real pain in the ass to be a symbol of home, family and pure-white womanhood for these guys. You don't get huge amounts of social validation for being a lesbian, but at least you don't have to police men's desires, keep their base sexual instincts in check, or serve as a civilizing influence on them the way straight women—wives and mothers—are supposed to. You get a break from the job of domesticating men. So it's quite annoying to be dragged back into service, even rhetorically, in order to prop up the institution of marriage."

Many contemporary gay and lesbian myths and public dialogues are contradicted in the pages of this book. The almost complete absence in queer media of a positive discussion of gay and lesbian sexual practices and cultures is challenged by the words of these contributors. The collected ideas—from Rofes' groundbreaking piece "The Ick Factor" and Lawrence Schimel's paean to butch desire, to Linnea Due's exploration of transsexuality and the

roundtable discussion between Jewelle Gomez, Amber Hollibaugh and Gayle Rubin—will foment more than a few discussions.

What happens when we start examining the lives of the other and listen as ours is examined? We gain new perspectives and fresh readings of cultural moments that push our experiences and understanding further.

With "In Goldilocks's Footsteps: Exploring the Discursive Construction of Gay Masculinity in Bear Magazines," Elizabeth A. Kelly and Kate Kane wonder about the similarities between personal ads in bear publications and the personal ads of mid-70s lesbian cultures. They notice where language such as "I am looking for a top man who is gentle enough to cuddle" is mixed with the more sexually explicit requests most often seen in gay male personal ads.

In "Getting It Up for Politics: Gay Male Sexuality and Radical Lesbian Feminism," Robert Jensen applies the analysis that most represents his thinking, radical lesbian feminist analysis, to gay sex culture phenomena such as the desire for anonymous sex, anal sex and pornography. By looking for and then examining "patriarchal norms" in gay male culture, Jensen brings together two cultural languages that rarely sit willingly or with such loving compatibility in the same sentence.

Do gay men and lesbians and all queers across identities actually talk to each other? While there is no doubt that we are continually assimilating and responding to aspects of each other's cultures, we rarely speak directly. And when we take the symbols and images from each other that we find useful, we don't often take their original meanings. In a historical time period where any public discussion about sex and sexuality goes against the grain of gay suburban propriety, the discussions presented in this book will incite reflection and wonder.

Where will all of this reflection end up? The answer is up for grabs, according to Rofes. "For those few of us who seek to form true co-gender or trans-gender communities, the sexual Berlin Wall serves as a deterrent. Yet I was left wondering, after editing this book, if bringing down this wall won't result in an erosion of gay and lesbian identities that might transform us all into bisexuals or polysexuals," he says.

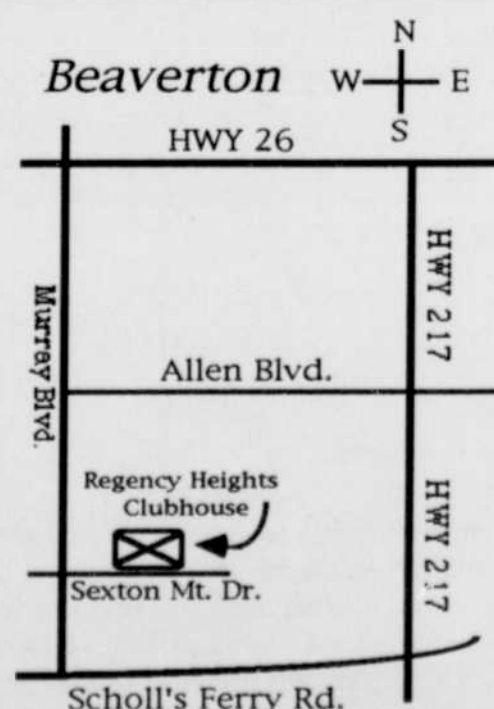
What will gay and lesbian identity be in another 20 years? The answer depends as much on the kinds of discussions we are open to having now as it does on our current and future legal protections.

■ **OPPOSITE SEX: GAY MEN ON LESBIANS, LESBIANS ON GAY MEN** edited by Sara Miles and Eric Rofes. New York University Press, 1998; \$16.95 paper, \$55 cloth.

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