

Entertaining Lesbians: Celebrity, Sexuality, and Self-Invention, by

Martha Gever. New York: Routledge, 1990. 236 pp. ISBN 0-415-94479-1 (cloth), ISBN 0-415-94480-5 (paper).

Katherine Sender

Annenberg School for Communication

University of Pennsylvania

ksender@asc.upenn.edu

4: Cognitions, Emotions, and Identity: 815 words

As her characteristically witty title suggests, in her new book Martha Gever “entertains” lesbians from a number of perspectives: she discusses lesbians in entertainment industries; she addresses how lesbians have entertained a variety of audiences, including lesbians; and she provides an overview of the ways popular culture has entertained the idea of lesbian celebrity since the early twentieth century. Her project, however, is to offer neither a “portrait gallery of lesbian celebrities” nor a “blanket characterization of the transformations of popular culture” that lesbian celebrity may have effected (p. 191). Instead, she is concerned with lesbian celebrities’ “self-invention, which is intimately related to opportunities for self-display, as well as the continual monitoring and adjustment of self-image” (p. 4).

Taking the lead from Foucault and from critics of neoliberalist governmentality such as Nikolas Rose, Gever argues that lesbian identities are produced, not simply discovered and displayed, as advocates of “lesbian visibility” would suggest. She locates the technologies of

such self-fashioning in dominant twentieth century discourses such as psychiatry and psychology that posited homosexuality as deviant, as well as in the opportunities offered by entertainment professions that foster fame, and in genres such as melodrama that have helped give shape to lesbian celebrity narratives. The strength of this book is in its detours through the changing social, industrial, and technological conditions that provided the very possibility of famously lesbian women. With data gleaned from meticulous historical research, she describes in depth a few case studies—focusing in particular on Radcliffe Hall, Mercedes de Acosta, and Martina Navratilova—to illustrate her argument for the active production of a public lesbian identity and for the negotiation of gender performance within that identity. The most successful chapter, “Going public: Star wars in the liberation movements” describes a profound ambivalence towards celebrity in the 1960s and 1970s: “Although it might seem inconsistent with efforts to identify noteworthy representatives, any lesbian who became renowned due to her involvement in the women’s or gay movement was suspected of using politics for self-aggrandizement.... [T]he concern with celebrity in lesbian cultural milieus was treated as a political problem as often as it was interpreted as an achievement” (p. 82). By the 1980s and 1990s, this ambivalence had largely been resolved through Navratilova’s successful reconstruction of herself as a lesbian icon, by deploying technologies of the body (her diet, exercise, and training regime) and by skillfully courting the mainstream press.

For a rich description of Hall’s, de Acosta’s, and Navratilova’s respective rise to fame, Gever’s book is a useful complement to existing histories of openly lesbian public figures. Yet although I appreciate her attempt to do something different than construct a gossipy lineage of famously lesbian women—Greta, k.d., Melissa, oh my!—her microscopic focus on very few celebrities leaves submerged the trajectory of increasing possibilities for lesbian celebrity

throughout the twentieth century. Most strikingly, she gives almost no attention to such pivotal moments as Ellen DeGeneres's coming out as both a celebrity and as her eponymous character in *Ellen* in 1997, nor to Rosie O'Donnell's open flirtation with the public on the topic of her sexuality until her "official" coming out in 2002. By concluding her historical overview with Navratilova, Gever ignores the rapidly changing meanings of lesbian celebrity that have been available to gay women in public life since the early 1990s, when the topic of "lesbian chic" erupted in the popular press and made the 1990s arguably *the* decade of lesbian celebrity. Gever does not attempt to link the growing possibilities for a non-pathologized public lesbian persona with the increased visibility that late twentieth century media offer, nor how these possibilities have been facilitated by the consolidation of the gay market over the past decade. On the contrary, by arguing (correctly) that markets—for celebrity as with other commodities—are "cultural as much as economic sites," she dismisses (incorrectly) the impact of the economics of media and marketing on lesbian publicity. She writes, "although there certainly have been economic repercussions of the explosion of sexual and gender politics in the late twentieth century, these do not account for all, or even most, of the effects of these social movements" (p. 195). Gever thus constructs the relationship between economics and social movements only in terms of repercussions, rather than as mutually enabling, and ignores the role of lesbian and gay celebrity in the formation and success of social movements. It becomes merely trite to argue that lesbians self-invent their sexually specific, gendered, public selves without a contemporary analysis of the media and marketing cultures in which this self-invention takes place.

Gever commendably resists constructing a pantheon of lesbian celebrities that "appears to support the understanding of lesbian history as a linear narrative of progress—from oppression to emancipation, from self-loathing to pride" (p. 116). The result, however, is a disparate collection

of fascinating but nonetheless jumbled snapshots of twentieth century lesbian celebrities and social theory.