

BOOK REVIEWS



Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure. By Sara Warner. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. 296 pp. \$55 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

In *Acts of Gaiety*, Sara Warner offers a crucial reevaluation of politically resistant feminist and lesbian/gay performances from the 1960s to the present; in so doing, she traces a performance lineage that complicates the rise of queer theory in academia on the one hand and the concomitant turn of LGBT movements to conservative social agendas on the other. Warner opens with two central theses. First, she argues that queer theory, with its focus on the disruption of sexual categories, tends to read earlier contestations of gender and sexuality as essentialist, thereby obfuscating the disruptive effects of these earlier interventions in their historical moments. Second, she argues that this historical forgetting looms large in the current alignment of LGBT activism with neoliberal political goals that contrast sharply with the agendas of earlier feminist and lesbian/gay activists.

In response to these academic and political developments, Warner recalls specific “acts of gaiety,” performances profoundly disruptive in their moment but largely ignored in historical narratives at present. Such scandalous acts challenged norms of sex and gender while likewise critiquing poverty, racism, and international imperialism. Given her focus on the obvious exuberance generated by these past acts of gaiety, Warner at times overlooks the joy to be found in present-day performances—including those that uphold some aspects of the status quo while contesting others. Consider the lesbian couple who fully acknowledge the social and economic privileges that accrue to legal marriage, yet still beam for the camera after obtaining their marriage license. Still, Warner rightly recuperates the earlier “acts of gaiety” she details in her text, as they offer a crucial opportunity to rethink the scholarship and politics of the present.

Warner offers careful case studies of acts of gaiety, beginning with the early theatrical exploits of radical feminist and lesbian Valerie Solanas. These days Solanas is best known for trying to assassinate Andy Warhol, but she also wrote plays, confronting prejudice against women and lesbians in her efforts to enter the Off-Off-Broadway scene of the 1960s. Warner offers a valuable reading of the early Solanas play *Up Your Ass*, long thought lost but found by Warner through painstaking archival efforts. The play follows butch lesbian Bongi Perez as she flirts with women, hobnobs with drag queens, turns a male trick in the bushes, and cavorts with a homicidal housewife. As Warner observes, the trashy sexual satire of *Up Your Ass* holds its own with the plays that won Jack Smith and Charles

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Ludlam fame on the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway circuit; the fact that Solanas was blocked from producing her play testifies to the obstacles faced by women and lesbians even in the ostensibly freewheeling Off-Off-Broadway scene.

Next, Warner confronts battles over same-sex marriage by contrasting the current drive to legalize such marriages with the disavowals of marriage by feminist and lesbian/gay activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Warner wins kudos for tackling this contentious issue, but the immensity of the topic calls for a book of its own; here Warner risks flattening history in her shorter chapter-length study. Consider how Warner contrasts two “zaps”—quick, guerilla-style disruptions of institutional places and practices—during the early years of gay and lesbian activism. The first was a 1969 zap by politicized lesbians called The Feminists, who occupied the NYC Marriage License Bureau to decry marriage as a mode of female subjugation. The second was a 1971 zap by men from the Gay Activists Alliance, who stormed the same Bureau to agitate for same-sex marriage rights. Warner deftly analyzes the actions of these two groups. Yet to conclude that the two zaps “reflect a fundamental difference between lesbian feminists and gay men over the issue of marriage at a key moment in LGBT history” (90) elides the fact that other gay men were busily critiquing marriage at this time. Indeed, Warner effects such an elision when she approvingly quotes a critique of marriage from the famous “Gay Manifesto” of 1969, without noting in the body of the chapter that it was written by Carl Wittman, a prominent male homosexual activist of the era.

Warner follows with a study of Jill Johnston, an influential dance critic of the later twentieth century and an “enfant terrible” of the feminist and lesbian movements of the 1970s. Today, Johnston is best remembered for her 1973 book *Lesbian Nation*; Warner reminds us, however, that she was also famous for her provocative public performances, in which she affirmed her link to feminist and lesbian activism while challenging the strictures she found to inhere in the activist movements themselves. Warner documents, for instance, an occasion in 1970 when Johnston took a topless swim at a poolside fundraiser for NOW—during a speech by NOW cofounder Betty Friedan. For Warner, such acts by Johnston are formative of a “Lesbian Nation” not beholden to the ideologies of nation-states, but forged instead through alliances of affect and activism. In a crucial counterpoint to her chapter on marriage, Warner ends her study of Johnston with an account of the unconventional civil union Johnston held with her partner Ingrid Nyeboe in Denmark in 1993, a ceremony that invites us to outfit such rituals for new purposes.

The next chapter takes for its starting point the cartoon ’zine *Hothead Paisan*, produced by Diane DiMassa from 1991 to 1996. The series followed the

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adventures of a “homicidal lesbian terrorist” who wreaks havoc on the heterosexist establishment. Warner praises the series for offering readers an opportunity to imagine themselves in the shoes of Paisan herself, then follows her account of the 1990s ’zine with an astute analysis of a musical theatre version of the series at the 2004 Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. Warner discusses her own reservations about the production in light of the War on Terror that had ensued from the September 11 attacks; specifically, she notes that the 2004 performance occurred mere weeks after the release of photos from the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal—photos that, to the shock of many, prominently featured women among the abusers. Warner argues that tropes of terrorist violence within the ’zine demand rethinking after Abu Ghraib. Crucially, Warner does not disavow the impetus of the performance; rather, she calls for renewed analysis of performative fantasy in the lesbian imaginary, the need to revisit such fantasies in response to our historical moment.

The final chapter details the return of the Five Lesbian Brothers to professional theatre with their 2005 production of *Oedipus at Palm Springs*. This adaptation of Sophocles features lesbian couples who meet for a weekend at the resort town; catastrophe ensues when a younger woman is revealed to be the daughter of her older girlfriend. Warner notes that this *Oedipus*, viewed as conventional tragedy, received mixed reviews. Yet Warner calls the play a dark comedy; she argues that it acts as an extended “cynical tendentious joke,” a term Freud used for a joke that channels unconscious self-hostility into self-deprecating humor. For Warner, *Oedipus* plays a wicked joke upon lesbians who mimic heteronormative family dynamics: “By adopting these same rituals, protocols, and sacraments of straight society, these characters are bound to the structures and strictures that govern them, including the incest taboo” (178). Warner offers a compelling analysis of the play and its reception. Yet she looks to Freud for a theory of jokes and their unconscious underpinnings, while also calling into question the incest taboo that, for Freud, undergirds all unconscious operations. This use of Freud embeds a tension in the chapter that I would like Warner to unpack in future work.

In her conclusion, Warner urges recuperation of acts of gaiety like those she has examined, the better to confront the present political moment. These recuperated acts can counter the forgetting of history endemic to queer theory, while contesting the neoliberal bent of current LGBT activism. True, there are a few occasions where Warner, in advancing her argument, overlooks the messy complexities that inevitably arise from radical political performance. But readers should take these occasions as spurs to their own inquiry into the text, rather than flaws within the text itself. Warner demonstrates that acts of gaiety inspired substantive political change in decades past. Today, in a vastly changed political landscape,

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could the revival of such acts inspire radical political action once again? As a queer leftist myself, I bear an abiding interest in this question; Warner gaily invites us to seek answers in our teaching, our performance, and our activism.

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