

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kathleen Martindale. *Un/popular Culture: Lesbian Writing After the Sex Wars*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1997. xiii + 224 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-3290-7; \$22.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-3289-1.

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Kathleen Martindale's *Un/popular Culture* focuses on the transformation of lesbian-feminism from a political vanguard to a cultural neo-avant garde after the feminist "sex wars" of the 1980s. Instead of presenting a simple historical narrative, in which the lesbian-feminism of the 1970s gives way to the lesbian postmodernism of the 1990s, Martindale attempts "to do justice to the theoretical complexity and the contradictions of lesbian feminism" (1). She states that the subject of *Un/popular Culture* is the "written texts of lesbian postmodernism...particularly those that self-consciously treat the development of this new cultural formation and critically engage with and against it" (24).

After introducing the terms of her argument, Martindale examines the role of texts in the construction of lesbian identity. "(T)he relationship between *lesbians and reading*, as a process which questions, complicates, and even transforms identities rather than merely affirming them," she writes, "still remains under-theorized" (53; Martindale's emphasis). In her analysis of lesbian culture, Martindale explicates the reciprocal relationship between lesbian cultural productions and lesbian identity. According to Martindale, every way of theorizing lesbianism is "flawed, partial, or exclusionary" (49); despite the limitations, however, texts are able create and transform lesbian identities. "Because there is no necessary connection between lesbianism and particular sets of political, aesthetic, or sexual preferences," she writes, "no single theoretical discourse fits all lesbians" (49).

Martindale continues to problematize political and theoretical categories as she examines the work of Alison Bechdel and Diane DiMassa, Joan Nestle, and Sarah Schulman. According to Martindale, Bechdel's "graphic

novel," *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which began to be published in book-length volumes in 1986, and DiMassa's *Hothead Paisan* zine, which was first issued in 1991, are a generation apart because of their temporal relationship to the sex wars. She analyzes the differences in the two comics, based on the discourses of lesbian-feminism and lesbian postmodernism. In her discussion of Nestle's autobiographical writing on butch-femme culture, Martindale explores the possibility of a continuum of butch-femme reading practices. Her essay on Sarah Schulman argues that Schulman's novels deconstruct the genre of lesbian fiction and, rather than fitting easily into the category of lesbian postmodernism, are "non-separatist but anti-assimilationist" (136). The last chapter, entitled "Que(e)rying Pedagogy," considers some of the problems associated with teaching un/popular cultures and with the institutionalization of lesbian cultural studies as an academic discipline.

In general, Martindale succeeds in showing the complexity of lesbian cultural productions. There are times, however, that her argument would have been clearer if she had included more background material. Yet, Martindale's copious notes and substantial bibliography provide ample resources for further study. Martindale raises more questions than she answers, but in so doing her book stimulates dialogue about an area of popular culture studies that deserves more critical attention. *Un/popular Culture* not only contributes to the scholarly discourse on lesbian culture but also participates in the ongoing process of theorizing lesbianism. *Un/popular Culture* leaves no doubt that Martindale, who died in 1995, was an engaging and innovative writer, scholar, and teacher.

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