

MODERN AMERICAN QUEER HISTORY

edited by Allida M. Black

Temple University Press (\$22.95)

by Charisse Gendron

Veteran queer historian John D'Emilio began to write about the Black pacifist and civil rights worker Bayard Rustin while studying the split between the New Left and the Democratic Party during the 1960s. Rustin's homosexuality was secondary to the story D'Emilio wanted to tell. Yet as he reveals in "Homophobia and the Trajectory of Postwar American Radicalism," secondary does not mean irrelevant, for Rustin's sexuality limited his opportunities and influenced his political philosophy. D'Emilio's strategy of looking at Rustin's sexuality within the larger context of his commitments and accomplishments typifies this excellent collection, which repeatedly questions the imperative to foreground queer identity when looking at complex queer lives. By stepping back from a "queer first" agenda, these writers do greater justice to queer activists, writers, public officials, soldiers, health workers, and church-goers, including those who thought of themselves as bisexual, heterosexual, or none of the above.

Bayard Rustin's is one of the fascinating stories about lesser-known figures in the volume. At the onset of the Cold War, he was poised to lead the movement to achieve civil rights for Blacks by means of peaceful resistance. He lost his footing in 1953, when his sponsoring organization, the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation, withdrew its support because police had picked him up in a car with two other men.

Despite efforts to blackball him as a danger to the movement, Rustin joined Martin Luther King in Montgomery during the bus strike in 1956. Urging Gandhism, Rustin devoted himself to King's career throughout the 1950s. But when he emerged from the shadows to organize a demonstration at the 1960 Democratic convention, Black activist Adam Clayton Powell threatened to accuse King and Rustin of having an affair unless King fired Rustin. So he did.

Rustin got a bit of a break in 1963 while planning the March on Washington. When Strom Thurmond, coached by J. Edgar Hoover, publicized the 1953 arrest, Rustin was already so publicly identified with the project that Black leaders had to defend him. Yet by the mid-sixties, Stokely Carmichael was calling Rustin an Uncle Tom for inviting coalitions with the Democratic Party and labor. This is where D'Emilio is really good. He realizes that Rustin turned centrist for both philosophical and personal reasons, including his experience of marginalization within the homophobic Left. The margin was not a powerful place to be, he believed, for him or for the civil rights movement.

In "The Burning of Letters Continues": Elusive Identities and the Historical Construction of Sexuality," Estelle B. Freedman shows us another person whose story is thick with historical particulars. Miriam Van Waters burned most of her love letters from Geraldine Thompson during a 1948 hearing to dismiss her as superintendent of the Massachusetts Reformatory for Women for tolerating homosexual activity among inmates. While Van Waters denied being a lesbian, Freedman points out that many women involved in primary relationships with other women during this

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period destroyed their correspondence, caught between a turn-of-the-century view of themselves as romantic friends and modern sexual discourses castigating them as perverts.

Although Van Waters expressed curiosity about gender and desire in surveys she drafted for adolescent girls ("did you wish to be a boy?") and teachers (are "crushes" between girls based on "mutuality of interest" or attraction between "masculine" and "feminine" types?), she apparently did not consider herself a gender invert, as doctors then described lesbians. Similarly, rather than disavow relationships between reformatory inmates, she disputed only that the women were "true" homosexuals. Most of them were not

pathologically aggressive in their relationships, so how could they be lesbians?

Van Waters slept in the same bed with Geraldine Thompson when visiting Thompson's family and was known to the grandchildren as "Grammy Thompson's yum-yum." A Rorschach test indicating she was not a homosexual did not convince the FBI, but Freedman resists labeling Van Waters—a courtesy befitting one who failed to redeem an important word but also protected vulnerable inmates from harsh treatment.

Detachment such as D'Emilio's and Freedman's allows fairness, compassion, and—in the case of Marc Stein's "Rizzo's Raiders, Beaten Beats, and Coffeehouse Culture in 1950s Philadelphia"—humor. Stein traces the media story of a 1959 police raid on a Philadelphia coffeehouse that began with neighborhood complaints about noise and "sass" and ended with official charges of—what else?—homosexual activity. He places his story in the larger contexts of a national concern with juvenile delinquency, not unrelated to publicity surrounding the Beat movement, and the rise of a corrupt police captain, Frank Rizzo, who was making a career of cleaning up "fag joints."

After the press reported the raid, readers protested that the coffee drinkers' civil liberties had been violated, and the Humoresque's owner Melvin Heiffetz filed suit against the city. Suddenly, in a couple of startling non sequiturs, the papers reported that the cause of the raid was not noise but narcotics and a letter to the editor denied the presence of homosexuals in the shop. Citizens petitioned the city to close the coffee shops, and the police commissioner revealed that youths brought in by the dragnet claimed to be seeking contact with "sex deviates" and "Lesbians." He also denied that the raid was an attack on "egg-heads" with the retort, "We have quite a few intellectuals in the department ourselves." Not to be confused with beats; one student patron of the Humoresque insisted that local "beatniks" were merely "pseudos" who liked to "smoke a pipe and put on a European hat."

During the court proceedings, Captain Rizzo, forgetting about the girls who came to the Humoresque seeking lesbians, claimed only to want to protect young women from contact with male homosexuals. As evidence of the homosexual presence, patrolmen testified that when they entered the shop "three boys were dancing ring-around-the-rosy." The judge found Heiffetz guilty of running a disorderly house and closed it down.

Decades later, Marc Stein asked Melvin Heiffetz what the heck had happened. Heiffetz, who estimates that 25–40 percent of his patrons were queer, claimed that when he opened the shop he had been too naive to pay off the police, who not only closed him down but harassed his lover on several occasions. Interestingly, although Heiffetz had been having sex with other males since he

middle class, conservative Republicans." And indeed, many of these leftist exiles don't agitate politically in Mexico, but rather as "capitalist investors" open businesses, invest in construction and real estate, or teach at the American School.

So the title seems rather hyperbolic. As Anhalt states from the very beginning, these were "not political exiles in the conventional sense," because they never made formal requests for sanctuary. Some insisted, "We were not political expatriates," or "We weren't persecuted in any way," or "We came to Mexico, not because we risked arrest or unemployment or harassment, but because we didn't like the political climate in the U.S." The "gathering" in the title doesn't seem to be such either. Anhalt repeatedly says how little they knew about each other, saw each other, and shared with each other.

Still, they faced an existential crisis: far from home and isolated from the world in which they found themselves. Mexican playwright Carlos Prieto, who was close to several expatriate families, summarizes the conditions of these self-imposed exiles' children: "They lived in a never-never world...not living anywhere. They're not living in the United States, and they're not living in Mexico. They're not Mexicans, and they're not Americans." ♦

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE ASSASSINATION OF GÉRARD LBOVICI

Guy Debord

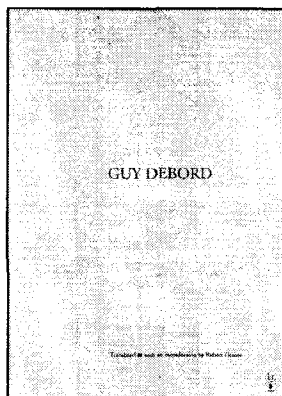
translated by Robert Greene
TamTam Books (\$15)

by Marc Lowenthal

In his 1988 *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord ominously stated that "under the rule of the integrated spectacle, we live and die at the confluence of innumerable mysteries." Although the context had been a particularly unsettling passage on terrorism, the statement bore an obvious allusion to Debord's friend, mainstream film producer and avant-garde/political publisher Gerard Lebovici, who was murdered in 1981. The assassination remains unsolved, and its motives unknown. Lebovici received a phone call and left his office; his body was found two days later in an underground parking lot, four bullets in his head. In between a missing event is buried.

Novelists make careers out of bridging (or "integrating") such severed facts—facts that reporters supposedly make *their* careers out of reporting. In the wake of Lebovici's death, reporters seemingly decided to switch professions: his "secret" life as Leftist publisher was exploited for all it was worth, and Debord, "third-rate Mephistopheles," "nihilist," and "guru," became a focus of attention. Several papers, in their efforts to fill in the blanks, went so far as to insinuate that he and his leftist "influences" had some involvement with the murder. After winning some libel suits, Debord followed up with this book, a virulent attack on the French press, but more broadly an expose on secrecy and disinformation, on which he would later elaborate in his increasingly pertinent *Comments*. *Considerations* also functions, almost unavoidably in face of the media's portrait of him, as something of an autobiographical preface to *Panegyric*, the autobiographical preface he would write five years later.

Who was this "mystery man," this "mad sadist"? "Never have so many false witnesses surrounded a man so obscure," Debord here

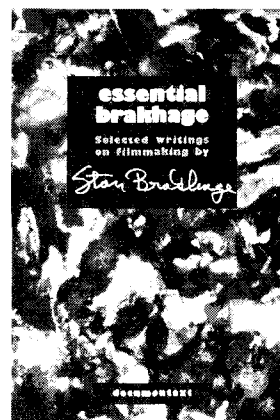


writes, ironically, later adding: "I am only 'mysterious' for those who do not know how to read me." The English translation of this short book (a shrunken version of the entire text has actually been squeezed onto the cover) should go some way in lifting this veil of "opacity" that has blanketed his work; far from opaque, Debord was, if anything, one of the few true classicists of the 20th century. Opening with an almost schoolboy exposition, Debord delivers his engaging and scathing

critique in his characteristically elegant and memorable prose. Gone is the haunting (and as odd as it may sound, *revolutionary*) melancholy of his early filmscripts; Debord here develops the chillingly dour tone that would characterize his late writings.

In one of the book's more optimistic moments, though, Debord states, almost as an aside: "One doesn't choose his era, although one can transform it." The question, though, is what happens to those who attempt and fail to transform it? In Plato's *Crito*, Socrates chose to die by his untransformed society's ruling rather than escape into exile. Indeed, exile used to be a harsh punishment; today it has become almost a badge of honor. "I have had the pleasures of exile," Debord concludes, "as others have had the pains of submission." Socrates submitted. Some choose neither, though, and others end up choosing for them. Lebovici was, as Debord reminds us, assassinated. Judgment came *after* in the media. ♦

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