

DEFIANT *desire*

Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron

Seizing the moment

Defiant Desire is a celebration of the lives of gay men and lesbians in South Africa. It does not and cannot claim to be a complete picture of gay and lesbian experience in this country. Rather, it tries to highlight some of the issues, the problems, the contradictions and the connecting points that make up our lives.

The book takes as its starting-point that there is no single, essential 'gay identity' in South Africa. What has passed for 'the gay experience' has often been that of white, middle-class urban men. The political and social cost of this perception, both in how we are represented and in how we are seen, has been enormous. If *Defiant Desire* has one aim, it is to expand — or at the very least re-examine — this narrow definition of 'gay identity'.

So we present a collage of essays, memoirs, polemics and pictures that acknowledge and explore some of the many facets of South African homosexual experience. In these pages you will find black youths from the townships, white mineworkers, lesbian sangomas, rich white 'entertainers' from the suburbs, coloured moffie drag queens, cross-racial working-class couples, political prisoners and sex workers. Much of this work is path-breaking, particularly that which details for the first time the extent to which homosexuality exists and flourishes in black communities and cultures.

Certainly, there is much in this book that stems from and reflects the urban mainstream. And while we record with pride the way this particular subculture has managed to claim space in the face of sometimes severe opprobrium, we also examine its limitations. To what extent and why have women and black people largely been excluded from 'mainstream' gay culture? What parallel cultures have existed, and how have they organised themselves? And how has the increasingly vocal presence of blacks and women transformed both the style and ideology of a South African 'gay identity'?

This in turn leads to the hardest question of all. What, if anything, do we all — blacks and whites and workers and professionals and men and women — actually share? Is there, could there have been, should there yet be, a common 'South African gay identity'? Perhaps the book, like South Africa's growing lesbian and gay movement itself, attempts to weave these people together with a thread of common experience that transcends our differentness and affirms our gayness, of being 'out of order' — in the eyes of the law, the authorities and the heterosexual establishment.

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This book is being completed in 1993, at the time of South Africa's transition to democracy. For three years now, since the unbanning of the liberation movements in 1990, our identities and aspirations have been unshackled. South Africans have explored, argued and exchanged ideas as never before. In bloody township battles, in tortuous constitutional negotiations, in campaigns leading up to a first democratic election, in unprecedentedly open media, South Africa's forty million citizens are staking claim to their future.

Defiant Desire is a product of these times: an attempt to engage in the current debate over what we want this land to be. For lesbian and gay South Africans, 'liberation' is a particularly loaded word. What role does sexual politics play in this time of transition? What do the struggles of those experiencing oppression in various ways — as blacks, as women, as gays and lesbians — have in common? Does their claim for equal rights, for democracy and dignity, tie them together in some way? Or does the call for equal rights for gays and lesbians detract from more urgent matters at hand — the righting of the wrongs of apartheid?

Defiant Desire attempts to answer these questions by examining, in depth, the relationship between lesbian and gay politics and the quest for democracy in South Africa. The core of activist contributors to this book are adamant that the struggle for justice and true liberation in this country must include a commitment to lesbian and gay equality. And, after much lobbying, the African National Congress came to agree. A clause in the ANC's proposed Bill of Rights (emulated in that of the Inkatha Freedom Party and the Democratic Party) outlawed discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, and this is reflected in the present draft Constitution.

And yet the status of gay and lesbian issues in the broader movement for democracy remains tenuous: gay issues continue to be seen as both frivolous and 'un-African'. The contributions by Nkoli, Chan-Sam, Kleinbooi, Chetty, Lewis and Loots, and, most notably, McLean and Ngcobo, suggest that the claim that homosexuality is a 'bourgeois Western phenomenon' which 'contaminates' the purity of African civilization is untrue. The essays of Gevisser and Holmes cast light on why and how this notion came about.

Homosexual experience in South Africa is unique, precisely because of our history of division and resistance. Our identities have been formed by our country's history of racial struggle. And our identities have been deformed by a system that

classified us into those with freedom and those without. Apartheid legislated who we were, what work we could do, where we could live, who we could associate with, what we could read and see and what kind of sex we could have. Apartheid even tried even to dictate to us our self-conception and our self-regard.

Asserting a lesbian or gay identity in South Africa is thus more than a necessary act of self-expression. It a defiance of the fixed identities — of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality — that the apartheid system attempted to impose upon all of us.

South African homosexual experience is also unique because of the demographic divergences our country reflects. From the 'developed world', we inherit notions of sexual freedom and gay subculture; from the 'developing world' we gain the imperatives of struggle, resistance, and social transformation. Charting the development of a lesbian and gay identity in South Africa means examining the way these ideas have interacted with each other: how they have clashed, and what their potential may ultimately be to consolidate into a potent lesbian and gay liberation movement — the first ever in Africa.

For all the above reasons, there is a moment that must be seized. *Defiant Desire* reflects and attempts to make something of this moment. Which leads to another of the book's aspirations: to assist in establishing a climate in which South African lesbian and gay studies can emerge. The more that is published by and about gay South Africans, the more interest there will be, from publishers, from academic institutions, and from the reading public. Only a few years ago, working class and peasant tradition, labour history and women's studies were largely ignored in South Africa; now these are at least taken seriously by publishers and the academic world. We have similar brave hopes for lesbian and gay studies.

About the contents

Challenging the idea of single, essential 'gay identity' has meant compiling a book that registers an enormous range of voices, styles and attitudes. *Defiant Desire's* form is necessarily as diverse as its content. The chapters range from critical essays, to attempts at historical reconstruction, to personal accounts, to memoirs that flirt with fiction. This means that a consistent style is neither possible nor desirable: each piece has determined its own form. Some contributions are intensely personal; others are abstracted and systemic studies.

In South Africa, as elsewhere, there is a personal politics to self-description. We all call ourselves something different: gay, moffie, lesbian, dyke, queer. What for one is a submission to language stereotyping is for another an assertive reappropriation of language. And so we have let each contributor determine the terms of his or her personal identification.

The book begins with Gevisser's history of lesbian and gay organisation in South Africa, 'A different fight for freedom'. By giving a detailed account of gay and lesbian organisation from the bars and house-parties of the 1950s through the law reform movement of 1968 to the gay upsurge in the 1980s and the current wave of more radicalised lesbian and gay activism, Gevisser creates a context for

the rest of the book. He also synthesises many of its themes: the interplay of sexual identity with the politics of race, class and gender; the interaction between middle-class whites and working-class blacks in the creation of a gay subculture; the reasons for so-called lesbian 'invisibility'.

Gevisser explores how homosexuals first consciously came together in leisure-time activity (clubs, bars, sports teams) to satisfy basic social needs before formalising themselves into self-consciously gay groups and then political movements. He looks at the relationship, in South African lesbian and gay subcultures, between confrontation and accommodation; between political advocacy and social support; between activism and acting out; between 'apolitical' conservatism and radical liberationism.

The two contributions in Section Two perhaps best explain the political reasons for this book — describing the oppression to which gays and lesbians are subject in South Africa. In 'Unapprehended felons', Cameron explores the South African legal system's letter and its spirit towards homosexuality, and assesses how the various constitutional models deal with non-discrimination towards lesbian and gay rights.

In 'Keeping sodom out of the laager', Retief looks at the ways the apartheid system has policed sexual minorities. Retief points to the link between apartheid oppression and gay oppression, and his central point is that sexual policing was an intrinsic project of apartheid: it helped consolidate Afrikaner Calvinist control by upholding 'Christian National' values in the face of what was characterised as a 'threat to white civilization'. Anything deemed threatening — including gays — was 'expelled from the laager'.

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Despite the apartheid state's repression, various gay and lesbian subcultures developed in South Africa. Some of these are examined in Section Three, 'Making space: Queer societies'. Given the homophobic society in which they have had to develop, these 'queer societies' are necessarily 'outsider' subcultures. They are defined by masquerade, resistance, subterfuge and sublimation.

We see masquerade and resistance in the way Chetty's moffie drag queens from the 1950s and 1960s and McLean and Ngcobo's township youths of the present day wilfully and often playfully subvert their preordained gender and sex roles. We see subterfuge in the way Johannesburg's 'Health Clubs', as described by Galli and Rafael, served as a clandestine sexual meeting-place for closeted gay men in the 1950s and 1960s. We see sublimation in the way Miller's gay men and women of Welkom, on the surface conservative Afrikaner *plattelanders*, have to bury their true identities deep underground.

What is astonishing is that these 'queer societies', even while marginalised and derided, are very much part of the larger communities in which they operate. In 'A drag at Madame Costello's', Chetty reclaims a critical piece of our history. Using clippings from *Drum* and *Golden City Post* as well as personal interviews, he reconstructs the moffie drag balls of the 1950s and 1960s. His work demonstrates

that homosexuality and drag are an indivisible part of the history and culture of the Western Cape's 'coloured' communities. 'A drag at Madame Costello's' was written as commentary to the series of remarkable photographs published in this volume — all taken at a 'Moffie Drag' in Madame Costello's Woodstock living-room in 1958. Ian Berry's photographs have a notable sympathy and sensitivity, and provide a glimpse of full lives lived behind a facade of dominant stereotypes.

'Lesbian Gangster', originally published in *Drum* under a different name, gives us a vivid glimpse of lesbian cross-dressing. It also shows how some lesbians, as outlaws, might have found common ground with other outlaws — gangsters — within Cape Town's coloured communities: a provocative illustration of how marginalised groups can make a common virtue of defiance.

In 'Moffies en manvroue', Lewis and Loots also demonstrate the central role of the 'moffie' scene in the Cape's coloured communities. But, by exploring the relationships of two working-class couples, their essay also demonstrates how these four people have managed to assert and develop their sexual identity and create alternate families within hostile territory. The authors' decision to record their informants at length in the Afrikaans-based Western Cape vernacular makes for challenging reading. But so much humour and creativity is embedded in this language that the effort is rewarded.

Work originating from or examining the Western Cape coloured communities (including Achmat's memoir, 'My childhood as an adult molester', which appears as a Testament in Section Six) constitutes perhaps the largest single segment of 'queer society' examined in the book. This is appropriate. These communities, by nature fluid, hybrid and permeable, contain the oldest, most developed and least-explored gay South African subculture; nowhere else in this country have homosexuals been so integral to a culture.

But homosexuality is an indivisible part of other black South African cultures too. In 'Abangibhamayo bathi ngimnandi', McLean and Ngcobo unearth the extent to which homosexual codes are embedded in contemporary township culture. Their informants — 20 township men, some of whom are members of the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW) — lead lives unexpectedly integrated into township culture. They are children of parents who know of their sons' homosexuality, and lovers of 'straight' men, or *injongas*, who collude in the masquerade that their sexual partners are 'women.' The mechanics of this charade make for sometimes startling reading. The piece details an intricate taxonomy of homosexual behaviour and sexual role-play, and looks at the way this imitates — and subverts — the heterosexual paradigm.

In a similar way, Chan-Sam used the GLOW Lesbian Forum to collect narratives of black lesbian life. While 'Five women' is not as comprehensive as the study of McLean and Ngcobo, it presents five moving vignettes, one of which is of a *sangoma* (traditional healer) who looks at the relationship between her sexuality and her vocation. The apparent tradition of lesbian *sangomas* is an aspect of our history that warrants more research.

Despite some of their rural roots, all Chan-Sam and McLean and Ngcobo's informants live in the big city. They thus have access to overt gay and lesbian communities. By contrast, Mike Olivier's profile of Vera Vimbela, a rural woman from the Transkei who is organising gays and lesbians in Umtata, signals the difficulties of being black, gay, and rural.

While Chan-Sam and Olivier record the lives of black lesbians, Beffon's 'Wearing the Pants?' looks, briefly but vividly, at butch/femme role-playing in white lesbian relationships. Like 'Abangibhamayo bathi ngimnandi', it raises provocative questions about the homosexual impulse to imitate heterosexual paradigms. Like McLean and Ngcobo, Beffon finds subversive possibilities within these relationships.

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While Section Three looks at 'making space', then Section Four, 'Queer cultural forms', looks at making noise: at the way cultural forms arising out of queer societies are used both to define the values and codes of these societies and to confront heterosexuals with their existence. In 'The Arista Sisters', Krouse recounts how he and a group of other gays doing their national service (a whites-only obligation) put on a drag-show. The masquerade both entertained the *troopies* and subverted the overbearing patriarchal structure of the army. But Krouse also examines the South African Defence Force's ambivalence to homosexuality — the fact that the SADF 'needs moffies' to serve as a counterpoint to what it means to be a 'real man' — and describes the 'queer societies' that gays establish for themselves within the SADF.

In a similar vein to drag, another popular expression of 'queer society' is South Africa's highly developed form of gay slang. Gerrit Olivier's 'From Ada to Zelda' provides an introduction to this slang, which creates a gay alphabet out of women's names. He looks at its possible use as a means of concealment on the one hand and of self-identification on the other. In an appendix to 'Abangibhamayo bathi ngimnandi', McLean and Ngcobo note that *isingqumo*, the township gay slang, serves the same function.

Along with drag and language, the emergence of a 'gay press', in the form of the newspaper *Exit*, has become another important vehicle for popular expression. In 'Exit', Davidson and Nerio look at the role that this newspaper has played in the politics and formation of a gay subculture.

If drag, *moffietaal* (gay language) and the gay press are popular cultural expressions of queer society, then the recurrent theme of homosexuality within South African literature is one of their 'high art' equivalents. In 'A thousand forms of love', De Waal examines the way five gay writers represent, through various means of deferral and sublimation, male homosexual desire. De Waal tracks a theme of transgression, running from ID Du Plessis through William Plomer (who flags his homosexuality only through innuendo), Damon Galgut, Stephen Gray and, finally, Koos Prinsloo.

De Waal's essay is an important contribution to an already established discourse. Two volumes of gay writing have been published in South Africa: Hennie Aucamp's *Wisselstroom*¹ and, more recently, the Congress of South African Writers' *The Invisible Ghetto*.² Aucamp's anthology of Afrikaans fiction has prodded a lively debate within the Afrikaans academy on the nature of gay Afrikaans writing. Besides literature, however, there are several other 'high art' forms which cry out for analysis from a gay perspective. These include the extensive role of homosexuality in mainstream South African theatre (most notably the work of 'high-art' draggers like Pieter-Dirk Uys and Nataníel); as well as homophilic fine art, both as rooted in South Africa's 'grand masters' (such as Alexis Preller) and in its latest incarnation in the work of young artists like Stephen Cohen and Mallory de Cock (who designed the cover for this book).

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Gevisser notes in 'A different fight for freedom' that claiming 'gay space' — the making of 'queer societies' and assertion of 'queer culture' — is always a precursor to the establishment of a lesbian and gay liberation movement. In South Africa, as elsewhere, there has been something of a progression from bar culture, to social support organisations, to political activism. Section Five 'Making waves: Lesbian and gay activism' examines the current political activity arising out of South Africa's lesbian and gay subcultures, and the relationship between this and the broader liberation struggle.

The section begins with two personal accounts, both by gay men, one black, one white, who were jailed for political reasons during the last years of formal apartheid. Both Simon Nkoli and Ivan Toms worked to integrate their gay identities with their anti-apartheid activism. Theirs are classic prison stories, but with a difference: for both Nkoli and Toms, physical imprisonment worked very strongly as a metaphor for the closet, and 'freedom' thus has several resonances.

In 'Wardrobes' Nkoli tells of his coming out, first to his family and then to his co-accused in the Delmas Treason Trial. His account of the way almost every *sangoma* in Sebokeng township tried to 'cure' him provides yet another insight into the workings of homosexual identity within urban township life. The graphic description of his coming out within the walls of Pretoria Central Prison reveals a behind-the-scenes battle at the Delmas Trial not previously told.

In 'Ivan Toms is a fairy?', conscientious objector Toms — the first white jailed for conscientious refusal to do military service — recounts the smear-campaign conducted against him by the South African Defence Force. Toms also addresses the more surprising subject of the implied homophobia he encountered within the anti-apartheid End Conscription Campaign. Both Nkoli and Toms bear witness to how difficult it has been for gay people to come out within the liberation movement.

In 'Identity crossfire', Kleinbooï too writes about the difficulties of being gay in the liberation movement, and, conversely, about the difficulties of being black in the gay movement. He records his alienation from both black and gay

groups on campus and provides an account of how compromising it is to juggle the political identities of 'black' and 'gay' within so charged and politicised a society. Toms describes how he found common ground with the cause of black South Africans through his own experience of oppression as a gay man. But Kleinbooie takes issue with any suggestion that the two can be equated: 'To say that heterosexism is the same as racism is actually trivialising racial oppression,' he urges.

Nevertheless, the linking of racial oppression and sexual oppression has been a common perception and strategy of lesbian and gay liberation groups in South Africa. As Gevisser notes in 'A different fight for freedom', there has been a major shift from the 'apolitical' (read conservative) gay movement of the 1980s to the liberationist gay movement of the 1990s, which has taken as its starting-point the need to fold lesbian and gay issues into the agenda of the broader anti-apartheid movement. The success of this strategy is charted in 'The lavender lobby,' in which Fine and Nicol describe the way the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists (OLGA) lobbied the African National Congress to include a clause protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination in its proposed Bill of Rights. And the physical manifestation of this new liberationism is described in 'Pride or protest?', in which Gevisser and Reid give an account of GLOW's annual Lesbian and Gay Pride Marches that have taken place since 1990.

But in 'Pride or protest?' we also see the dilemmas caused by the gay movement's new radicalism: most white gay men are alienated from the movement, and GLOW's own constituency of younger black men and women still feels the need for social support before embracing political activism. And in Holmes' 'White rapists make coloureds [and homosexuals]', we see another major problem faced by this new liberationism — one that Toms and Nkoli painfully enunciate — the continued homophobia that exists within the 'democratic movement'.

Holmes offers a complex analysis of the defence put up for Winnie Mandela during her 1991 kidnapping and assault trial. Mandela claimed that she had ordered four youths to be 'removed' from a Methodist manse to protect them from sexual abuse by the minister, Paul Verryn. Holmes unpicks the homophobia in this defence: the fact that homosexuality was simply equated with sexual abuse and thus with betrayal of the cause and bad parenting. Holmes demonstrates how Mandela set herself up as 'good mother' as opposed to Verryn's 'bad father'. She concludes that the Mandela defence was 'queerbashing with family values'.

All the above writers look at the tenuous relationship between gay politics and the broader democratic movement. Armour and Lapinsky's 'Lesbians in love and compromising situations' in its turn examines the equally tenuous relationship between lesbian politics and the gay movement. Through a survey of feminist organisation in Cape Town, they unearth the roots of a specifically South African lesbian consciousness, touching on the issues of lesbian marginality within gay politics and lesbian separatism.

In South Africa, AIDS has long ceased to be depicted as only a 'gay disease': the grim arithmetic of heterosexual transmissions has rendered sexual stereotyping of those at risk redundant. But the gay community has been brutally

and disproportionately hit by HIV. No account of gay lives in South Africa would be accurate without including it as a central theme. Pegge's 'Living with loss in the best way we know how' describes how the epidemic has spread through Cape Town's gay community and how gay men have responded to the crisis.

Placing this essay in the section on lesbian and gay activism is appropriate. North American- or European-style AIDS activism has not developed in South Africa. Nevertheless, given the compounded stigma of illness, sin and contamination that mars public perceptions of AIDS in South Africa, the work that Pegge documents constitutes an especially necessary and courageous form of activism. The fight against the spread of HIV and for fair, compassionate and appropriate services should be as much part of the gay movement's agenda as more recognisably 'political' issues.

The last contribution in this section, Ricci's 'Of gay rights and the pitfalls of the "PC"', serves as a dissenting — or at least cautionary — voice to what precedes it. Ricci scoffs at 'political correctness', which he sees as gaining currency in South Africa. He notes that 'it would be sad indeed if South Africa went from reactionary "old" oppression to trendy "new" oppression without any stage of true democracy in between.' He warns the budding South African gay and lesbian movement 'to guard against the "PC" idiocies and excesses of far more established and powerful protest groups,' and takes issue with several gay holy cows. These include the very use of the word 'gay'.

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The concluding section of the book, 'Testaments', is a collection of personal memoirs. Prinsloo's 'Promise you'll tell no-one' and Achmat's 'My childhood as an adult-molester' explore the complex comings to sexual consciousness of two children. John's 'Pretended families' examines the moment at which a gay man and a lesbian decide to have a child together. Mayne's 'In memory of Rocky' is an obituary. Their trajectory, in simple narrative terms, is one from birth, through parenting, to death.

In more thematic terms, the section gives us four very different glimpses of moments in lives that are informed by homosexual consciousness but not dictated by it. Prinsloo's work, treading on and sometimes trampling over the line between memoir and fiction, shows the mutability of sexual identity at a formative time in its protagonist's life. Achmat, by skilfully weaving an account of his coming of sexual age into a rich and textured description of his home-life in Salt River, gives powerful voice to the indivisibility of sexual, social, community and political consciousness. John explores the difficulties of being a gay parent, but also the common ground he and the mother of his child have with all parents.

And, finally, Mayne uses the form of the obituary to its full creative and expressive potential. The untimely AIDS-related death of a friend allows her to remember his life and her own, the 30-year relationship between them, and the difficult and complicated positions they both held in their society — she as a white lesbian, he as a coloured gay man. Mayne's tribute is a fitting close to the book,

perhaps just as Gevisser's account of Linda Ngcobo's funeral is a fitting opening. The time of our community's greatest potential power, constitutionally and socially, is also a time when many of us are at risk of infection with HIV, or, like Rocky and Linda Ngcobo, are succumbing to the epidemic.

Though Mayne recounts the loss of a friend through AIDS, she also shows how friendship can generate dignity and pride and transcendent bonds. These can surpass the divisions which our blackness or whiteness, our maleness or our femaleness, our HIV infection — or our freedom from it — impose upon us. In this her account is not a memorial of the past, but a hopeful marker for the future.

Inclusiveness, assertion and pride

One of our contributors validly states that the impact of Johannesburg's first two annual pride marches, in 1990 and 1991, was undermined by the way the media focussed on the presence of drag queens. Should the lesbian and gay movement, in its attempt to present a serious and compelling argument for equality, allow drag queens to participate in a pride march? This is a continuing discussion among gay activists and writers, both in South Africa and abroad³, and the issue cuts to the heart of the difficult relationship between personal identity and political strategy. It is an issue we have had to confront in editing this book. Should we present an upright, buttoned-down image of gay life and culture? Would we play into society's stereotypes by including photographs of 'moffies' in drag; by boasting about butch dykes and sexually promiscuous men; rather than representing only 'normal' boy-and-girl-next-door homosexuals?

The simple answer to these questions is that we will not do to those among us what society has done to all of us: we will not marginalise — or deny a voice to — anyone. We will rather celebrate our diversity, and honour those forms it takes which most courageously and assertively flaunt what is common to all of us — that society disparages us for being different, no matter how buttoned-down some of us may appear on the surface.

A more complicated answer is that since we reject the very notion that there is an 'essential' gay identity in South Africa, no one of us can claim to represent a single, unchangeable 'gay' or 'lesbian' image. This book's own 'activism' is, as we stated earlier, to present the multiplicity of gay and lesbian experience. This contains within it as much complexity, difficulty and possibility as heterosexuality. Excising more difficult manifestations of homosexuality might proffer strategic rewards. But valuing strategy over truth is in itself a form of self-censorship. Furthermore, the product, a conforming and inoffensive representation of the homosexual, is as stereotyped and one-dimensional as the very images it tries to counter — the pansy, the drag queen, the child-molester, the disease-carrier. And, like all one-dimensional stereotypes, it can be knocked down as easily as it is erected.

A more lasting acceptance and tolerance of sexual minorities will come about only once we are acknowledged in all our complexity; only when society understands the extent to which we are embedded within it and thus imbued with its own quirks and pathologies, its own range of values and attitudes. And until

lesbian and gay communities themselves accept the sometimes inconvenient deviances and dissents they encompass, we cannot hope to persuade society at large to embrace the same project.

Johannesburg, June 1993

Notes

- 1 Hennie Aucamp (ed), *Wisselstroom* (Human & Rousseau: 1990).
- 2 Matthew Krause and Kim Berman (eds), *The Invisible Ghetto: Lesbian and Gay Writing from South Africa* (COSAW: 1993).
- 3 See Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen, *After the Ball: How America will Conquer its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the 1990s* (Plum: 1990).