biographies do, and are thoroughly engaging, even exciting, to read. These women are honest, open, resilient and above all, pragmatic about their situation. The book is also a resource for women wanting to learn more about HIV, particularly for those who have the virus. Housing needs, legal issues, pregnancy, sex and allopathic medical treatments are outlined as are other healing techniques such as naturopathy and Chinese medicine.

Women and HIV/AIDS: an International Resource Book takes a truly global perspective, with contributions from women (and a few men) across the world. It is a state-of-the-art source book which provides practical examples of good health promotion activities, ideas for running workshops on many aspects of sexuality and HIV, as well as clear discussions of medical and social issues. It also provides an excellent and comprehensive overview of women, sexuality and HIV across the globe. The contributions are written in an

open and friendly way, giving useful tips and hints on a wide variety of issues from getting funding to assertive techniques in condom use. This resource book should be on the bookshelf of every person interested in women, in sexuality and relationships and in international and development issues. The book is published in association with AHRTAG, an international health information agency which aims to provide affordable and appropriate resources, so the book will be available, cheaply, across the world. It is, quite simply, brilliant.

Hazel Slavin

Note

- 1 Positively Women can be contacted at: 5 Sebastian Street, London EC1V 0HE. Tel: 071 490 5515 (client services), 071 490 5501 (admin). Branches in Edinburgh and Glasgow can be contacted through Scottish Aids Monitor; 031 557 3885 (Edinburgh) or 041 353 3133 (Glasgow).

Lesbians Talk (Safer) Sex

Sue O'Sullivan and Pratibha Parmar

Scarlet Press: London 1992,
ISBN 1 85727 020 7, £4.50

Not just about latex; *Lesbians Talk (Safer) Sex* is a comprehensive overview of a range of issues concerning lesbians in relation to HIV and AIDS. Sue O'Sullivan and Pratibha Parmar's well-researched book is the latest in the Scarlet Press 'Lesbians Talk' series, and is the first British publication to tackle exclusively the question of lesbians' place in the struggle against AIDS.

There have been attempts in the past to exclude lesbians from involvement in the struggle against the virus. Some gay men have dismissed lesbians' calls for adequate safe-sex advice, citing 'virus envy' as an ulterior motive, and lesbians themselves have pointed out the

danger of diverting energy from other health issues of more direct concern to lesbians, such as breast and cervical cancer. The authors argue that different groups fighting among themselves can only dilute the power of collective action: 'We can only meet the needs of specific groups if we admit *everyone* affected by HIV and AIDS to the arena' (p. 49) and they emphasize the economic dimension of the devastating effect of the virus among the poor in the US, Asia and Africa.

O'Sullivan and Parmar present their book as 'a challenge to complacency and indifference' (p. 10) and controversial issues such as the perceived 'low risk' status of lesbians and the realities of lesbian sexual behaviour are tackled in a refreshingly non-judgemental way. Ultimately, the message is unequivocal; it is our personal responsibility to make informed choices, and to press

for more resources and research. In selecting sometimes conflicting quotes from various AIDS workers, the authors present the true complexity of lesbians' position, without feeling any compulsion to simplify and, by emphasizing lesbians' political responsibilities, the authors succeed in linking lesbians' response to AIDS to those of other groups.

In recent years the safer-sex message for lesbians has been muddled by contradictory advice issued by respected agencies. For instance, it was not lost on lesbians that dental dams were not advised for heterosexuals – raising the ludicrous question of a difference in the male tongue. The book clears away much of this confusion by not prescribing a rigid set of safer-sex practices. Instead, casting rumour aside, the authors present current medical findings on HIV and its likely routes of transmission. The choice of whether or not to use gloves and/or dental dams is left to the individual.

When considering lesbian safer-sex practices, the authors assert that it is lesbians themselves who are best placed to develop their own health strategy. Government agencies have shown themselves unable, or unwilling, to target safer-sex education effectively, and many health authorities have been reluctant to address gay men directly at all. The relative invisibility of lesbians in society has meant an even less adequate appraisal of our own vulnerability. Gay men have taken on responsibility within the community for safer-sex education, using language that relates directly to themselves. In order to construct a comparable sexual language for lesbians it is necessary to acknowledge two problems; the titillation value of lesbianism in the straight world, as evinced by its mock presence in heterosexual pornography, and the divide within the community itself over the SM debate. In an attempt to overcome these outside influences and establish what the term 'lesbian

sex' means to lesbians themselves the chapter 'Talking sex, talking dirty' presents a wealth of words and phrases to describe the undescribable: 'fingers dancing on clits, beside clits, on arseholes, across nipples, on lips, on palms, across backs' (p. 35).

In 'The agnostic position' Parmar and O'Sullivan set out their vision of how lesbians could respond to the AIDS crisis: 'In celebration of our perversity, we should be revelling in the wealth and breadth of the sexual choices we can make in the time of AIDS and joining with others to end the epidemic' (p. 47). They encourage lesbians to practice safer-sex to whatever level makes their partners and themselves feel safe, and, as a precursor to this, stress the importance of overcoming entrenched attitudes towards other lesbians' sexual behaviour.

One neglected area is the emotional strain many lesbians experience due to bereavement, or as a result of caring for a friend or relative with AIDS. For the next few years at least it seems likely that lesbians in Britain will continue to experience AIDS and HIV principally as affecting their gay male friends and brothers. Lesbians who care for people with AIDS, or who have HIV-positive friends, have to cope with their own stress, sometimes without much support. In omitting to address this subject the authors may be choosing to reach as wide a range of lesbian readers as possible, but it is an area that is largely missing in current AIDS literature.

Every lesbian owes it to herself to be informed and *Lesbians Talk (Safer) Sex* contains vital information for any lesbian living during the AIDS crisis, whether sexually active or not. The last chapter contains a comprehensive list of AIDS organizations, suppliers of safer-sex materials and a useful summary of further reading and, although lesbians are mentioned in other safer-sex publications, this book is the first

time lesbians have been addressed exclusively and in such depth.

**Sophia Chauchard-Stuart and
Sheridan Nye**

Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism

Mica Nava

*Sage: London 1992,
ISBN 08039 8607 6, £11.95 Pbk,
ISBN 08039 8608 4, £35.00 Hbk*

This book provides a journey into the development of feminist thought by bringing together a collection of Mica Nava's writings (and lectures) from the early 1970s to 1992, providing commentary (sometimes developed, sometimes brief) after each chapter. It begins with the family and tours through youth provision, including the controversial article (from *Feminist Review*) on a girls' project and responses to lesbianism; it then addresses responses to sexual abuse and ends with three essays on consumerism. It thus moves from concerns with the state to subjectivity; from generalization to contradiction, ambiguity and inconsistency, showing in passing how theoretical language changes.

The book tries to combine two very difficult tasks. Firstly, it contextualizes the collection of essays within the political climates and theoretical landscapes of the time of their writing. The book itself is a product of its time. The opening introductory sentence admits a debt to postmodernist thinking, declaring that the book is part of an acknowledgement that all knowledge and intellectual production is fragmentary and transitory. By contextualizing each piece of work the book charts a path through a number of conflicting feminist debates. This gives the reader a sense of legacy, permanence and change to the current debates.

Secondly, it tries to tie in the subjective formation of the author into this wider landscape, by linking and exploring the relationships between history, desire and knowledge. This is achieved by centralizing psychoanalysis. This process of contextualizing can be seen as part of the more recent reflexive concerns with situating the production of knowledge (as discussed in the work of Sandra Harding, Nancy Harstock and Donna Haraway). A brave and honest attempt is made by Mica Nava to view herself as both a product of and producer of the text. She also problematizes the position of the reader by making obvious the reader's psychic registers. I would recommend the introduction as compulsory reading for any feminist methodology course in which questions such as 'how do I know?' and 'why I thought what I thought' are raised. It also fronts the ethical and ideological imperatives in the evaluation of intellectual works.

The chapter commentaries also refer to the *feelings* which block or enable us to write. Feeling brave, Mica Nava argues, is a prerequisite for writing against any orthodoxy. Fortunately she has felt brave enough to challenge some important 'truths' that were ossified in the name of feminism. For instance, Mica Nava problematizes feminism as a moral code. Every time she searches for the certainty articulated in some feminist positions all she finds is contradictions. She believes, however, that agency and contradiction can co-exist. She is also highly critical of the responses to her work which have used sexual preference as a form of moral high ground for the purposes of moral regulation. The excessive voluntarism that is