

Radical reflections

By Christine Dinsmore

Jill Johnston's blue eyes sparkle just a little bit more when she recalls the night that she left Betty Friedan speechless – well, almost speechless.

At a posh East Hampton fundraiser for Women for Equality in 1970, Johnston leapt into the pool *au naturale* just as Friedan was introducing Gloria Steinem. As Johnston emerged from the water, she was bombarded with accusatory questions: Are you showing off? Is this a plot to sabotage the party? Are you a radical lesbian? Although she could have answered yes to any of the questions, she offered only one explanation: "I was hot and drunk."

Johnston, who was a reporter for *The Village Voice* at the time, wrote about that event and many others during an era when lesbians were the "lavender menace" that threatened the women's movement. And nobody was more of a threat than Johnston was.

"They were wild times," Johnston says, reflecting on the early '70s. "We were developing an identity that didn't exist. It was the first wave of lesbian feminism."

Johnston led that wave as the first out lesbian in mainstream journalism. At the *Voice*, Johnston's bravery in challenging the status quo made her a legend to a generation of women. "Johnston is more than an underground culture hero or Amazon cheerleader," wrote a *Voice* reader in 1971, "She's a bloody genius."

She became a national symbol of radical lesbianism when her controversial book *Lesbian Nation* hit the stands in 1973. But just a few years later, the political climate changed, and lesbian separatists like Johnston were considered by many to be a relic of another era.

Now, 25 years later after *Lesbian Nation* first hit the stands, Serpent's Tail Press has released *Admission Accomplished: The Lesbian Nation Years*, which includes essays from Johnston's earlier book as well as many of her old *Voice* columns.

Kate Millet, author of such books as *Sexual Politics* and *The Loony Bin Trip*, said she is happy that Johnston's works are being reissued for a new generation of lesbians. Because Johnston's writing chronicled an era, Millet says, her writings are pertinent for younger women and might energize them to "add excitement to their own lives and to the movement."

"She was the first and the bravest," says Millet. "Except for Rita Mae [Brown], no one was out or taking the risk."

Out at the *Voice*

Johnston began her career as an art critic for the *Voice* in 1959. By the mid-1960s, her writing had evolved into a personal chronicle. In 1968, on the road à

la Jack Kerouac, she wrote articles that Johnston says “anyone in the know” realized were about her travels around the country with her girlfriend.

“Jill was a feminist version of the hero on the road – like the Beat Generation,” says Phyllis Chesler, psychologist and author of *Women and Madness*. “Up until then it had only been men.”

Johnston became a *Voice* star, and readers either loved her or hated her. Her anarchic style, which she calls “Dada-like” because, like the art movement, it rejected authority, alternated between frivolity and fury.

“I was schooling myself in a form of illiteracy,” says Johnston. “It was anecdotal, a travelogue. I was creating my own thing.”

Her 1971 coming-out piece in the *Voice*, “Lois Lane is a Lesbian,” made history for gay women, Millet recalls. Not only did Johnston officially come out in this piece, she challenged the straight world about the “heterosexual problem.”

“It is, in fact, the heterosexual problems which create a gay liberation movement or any movement,” wrote Johnston, “to end the artificial social construction of sexual specialization which has some of our members ill and confused.”

By then Johnston was already a lesbian icon. She would arrive in airports and be met by throngs of women. But she also threatened a lot of people.

Lisa Cowan, who hosted the first all-night feminist radio show on WBAI, *Electra Rewired*, says that Johnston was the first open lesbian she ever interviewed on her show. Cowan, who was 19 and straight at the time, says that even though she thought Johnston was “totally groovy,” she also felt intimidated by her.

“She was a wild woman,” says Cowan, who today identifies as a lesbian. “I had a typical straight woman’s response: ‘Is she going to come on to me? I hope, I hope, I hope.’”

Johnston’s history of pushing the envelope began when she was an art critic, according to Yvonne Rainer, renowned choreographer and filmmaker. During a time when cultural writing was more formal, Johnston threatened the status quo by introducing an autobiographical style, which has become prevalent today.

She was well respected in the art world, says Rainer. But after coming out as a lesbian, Johnston was no longer taken very seriously by the heterosexual art crowd.

“In a certain way, she was the first lesbian,” says Rainer. “A lot of freedom is taken for granted now – even though the big battles aren’t won. Young people need to know it wasn’t always this easy. Jill was so unabashed even in her nuttiest, off-the-deep-end times. There was something so fascinating in her militancy and courage. You don’t see much of that these days.”

And militant she was. Johnston took delight in challenging mainstream feminism for its homophobia, classism, and racism. Her columns’ spotlighting the movement’s shortcomings made her a persona non grata to many high-profile feminists.

When a straight feminist said, for example, at a planning meeting for a women’s rally, that only “real” women should talk at the demonstration because lesbians have the gay liberation movement, Johnston struck back. In a column

called “The March of the Real Women,” Johnston accused straight feminists of “always trotting out the line” that sexual orientation doesn’t really matter, when “sexual orientation matters a lot.” Johnston said, “You are who you sleep with and to continue sleeping with the man is to remain only half a woman...”

In the column about her dip in the East Hampton pool, Johnston also wrote about a woman who said that she pitied women who didn’t have maids because they couldn’t be free to pursue loftier careers. The woman said that prior to having money for a maid, she wanted to jump off a bridge.

“It had eluded me that the movement had so much to do with maids,” wrote Johnston in her “Bash in the Sculls” article. “We need a better distribution of maids. Maids for everybody. Maids for the MAIDS.”

Johnston’s critique of mainstream feminists infuriated many. The *Voice* was bombarded with letters responding to her columns. She garnered so much attention that the newspaper featured her in ads to drum up subscriptions.

“It is quite possible that Jill Johnston is one of the most important, radical, and innovative writers of our time,” one reader wrote in 1971. “Johnston has been crapping out these past years,” another wrote. “Ms. Johnston is a sick, sad child.”

By 1975, though, the spotlight had dimmed. Radical separatists feminists were considered dinosaurs. When Johnston stopped writing for the *Voice*, her fame vanished like the radical times she had covered.

“It became survival time after 1975. Gates were clanking shut,” says Johnston. “The conservative movement came into play. Anybody with a title like *Lesbian Nation* would be affected. It’s like something you’re supposed to live down.”

Mellowing out

Today the 69-year-old Johnston lives in the West Village with her partner of 18 years, Danish-born Ingrid Nyeboe. With Nyeboe, Johnston reclaimed her two children, whom she had lost “under patriarchy” in 1963 after her divorce.

On June 26, 1993, Johnston and Nyeboe were wed in Denmark, where same-sex marriages became legal in 1989. Johnston, the one-time antimonogamy radical who wrote in the 1970s that she wanted to get every pretty woman out of the closet and “into my bed,” is now legally married, in Denmark if not the United States.

“I’m not anti-monogamous anymore. We were family smashers – against the patriarchal nuclear family that oppressed women,” says Johnston. “We couldn’t think of another family to create at that time. Partner instability – a free-for-all. There were guilty relationships when you had them. They seemed very temporary and it caused a lot of pain.”

Some of her old fans may wonder whatever happened to that “wild woman.” She lives quietly among her books and family.

“I miss the attention. With age, you become more invisible. No one notices you on the street,” says Johnston. “Then again, it makes life easier. But attention now is tied to my survival as a writer.”

Her 1996 book, *Jasper Johns: Privileged Information* caused a stir by delving into gay themes in the artist's work. Her latest project for Houghton Mifflin, called *Write First, Then Live*, is about "writing yourself into existence" rather than writing a memorial.

Today she identifies as a writer, a lesbian feminist, a married partner, a mother and a grandmother. She bemoans how conservative the country has become and "hopes the revolution comes around again."

On the 25th anniversary of *Lesbian Nation*, however, she has become mellower. She laughs at how radical lesbian feminists were so judgmental and outspoken years ago. Referring to herself and other separatists as "politically correct fascists," she marvels at how quick everyone was to voice their opinions.

"We would be free to say, 'You should have shorter hair,' or 'You shouldn't wear that,'" says Johnston. "We'd ask, 'What's your diet like?' and then say, 'No, you shouldn't eat that.' We'd do that to perfect strangers."

Displaying the humor that captivated her readers, she reflects on what parts of her writing from the *Lesbian Nation* years still hold up today.

"I tend to agree with all that I've ever written," she says with a little chuckle. "The lesbian woman is the woman to be."