

INTRODUCTION

Tommi Avicelli Mecca, Editor

“We are a revolutionary group of men and women formed with the realization that complete sexual liberation for all people can not come about unless existing social institutions are abolished. We reject society’s attempt to impose sexual roles and definitions of our nature.”

—New York Gay Liberation Front Statement of Purpose

It seemed like a sudden transformation, but it wasn’t: Queers had gone from a small movement of properly dressed “homophiles” (men in suits, women in dresses) marching around Independence Hall in Philadelphia every July 4 to a rowdy bunch of militant drag queens, long-haired hippie men in jeans and T-shirts, and lesbian/feminist women who refused to bake the bread and make the coffee, either in the gay liberation or in the women’s movement.

It had been brewing for decades, at least since 1949, when Communist Party labor organizer Harry Hay brought together a rap group for gay men that became the Mattachine Society. A lesbian organization, Daughters of Bilitis, followed a few years later. With McCarthyism and sexual repression the norm, the ’50s were not an easy time to gain support for anything unorthodox.

Relief was on the way. The ’60s ushered in an era of sexual freedom previously unimaginable in America. Young people rejected the conservative values of previous generations and asserted their right to their bodies and their sexuality. Queer radicals took a bit longer to demand their place in the revolution. In the meantime, they did what many other young people were doing: They listened to rock music, grew their hair, hung out in jeans and T-shirts, moved to farms, lived in communes, made lots of love and turned on and dropped out.

They also risked their lives down South with the Freedom Rides, marching alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the thousands of others who demanded an end to segregation. Some, like

Simeon White of Kinston, North Carolina, mobilized against racism in their own hometowns. Many of them were in the crowd in Washington, D.C., when King made his historic “I have a dream” speech. In fact, a gay African American man, Bayard Rustin, helped organize that march.

They hitchhiked from all over big- and little-town America to play protest songs or read stream-of-consciousness poetry in Greenwich Village or North Beach cafés. They spoke out at Berkeley for free speech with Mario Savio and others who ushered in a new era for America’s college students. They were teargassed while defending People’s Park or marching on campuses against the unjust war in Vietnam.

They organized and fed poor people as part of the Black Panthers. They were members of the Young Lords (a Puerto Rican group) in Philadelphia or Chicago. They were part of the United Farm Workers movement in California. They joined the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) to stop the war in Vietnam and prepare for the revolution that would change America. They came to San Francisco wearing flowers in their hair for the Summer of Love.

At least one of them, beat poet Allen Ginsberg, declared that he was “putting his queer shoulder to the wheel.” While he was a hero to many, few were willing to follow his lead and break free of the closet.

The signs of a more militant queer spirit were always there among the most vulnerable queers, the street queens who couldn’t pass as anything other than what they were. Tapping into the anger of the times, they rose up and fought back at Cooper’s Donuts in Los Angeles in 1959, Dewey’s Deli in Philadelphia in 1965, and Compton’s Diner in San Francisco in 1966.

The fourth rebellion was the charmer: In June 1969, a routine police raid on a West Village gay bar called the Stonewall Inn sparked several days of unrest that gave birth to the modern queer movement. It was this incident that overnight would send thousands of counter cultural types, many from the civil rights, feminist and anti-war movements, racing out of their closets. It prompted Ginsberg to remark that queers had finally lost “that wounded look.”

The first manifestation of post-Stonewall activism was the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). Unlike the homophile organizations of the ’50s and ’60s, the new group wasn’t afraid to speak its name or its politics proudly. The name “Gay Liberation Front” was derived

from the National Liberation Front, the Vietnamese group that fought the U.S. occupation of its country. The new movement saw itself in solidarity with all other struggles for social justice.

As Len Richmond and Gary Noguera, editors of *The Gay Liberation Book*, a pioneering anthology published by Ramparts Press in San Francisco in 1973, wrote: "Gay liberation is a radical movement that advocates a radical change in society—its social structures, power structures, its racism and sexual dogmas. We have a commitment not just to homosexual liberation but to total human liberation."

Activists with fabulous chosen names such as Blackberri, Hibiscus and Sweet Basil Razzle Dazzle marched, organized and generally made trouble. They wore outrageous outfits and paraded the street in what was then called "genderfuck," a form of dress that turned upside down society's notion of gender. A bearded man in long hair, an evening gown, makeup and army boots was a sight to be seen on the streets anywhere in America in 1969 or 1970. David Bowie and the New York Dolls, among others, stole their gimmicky looks (and made tons of money) from the "genderfuck" of those early gay liberationists.

At antiwar protests, gay men used campy new tactics to fend off cops and defuse tensions. As Kiyoshi Kuromiya relates in *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Love* (Marc Stein, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), "We'd go up to a line of cops with tear gas grenades and horses and clubs. And link arms and do a can-can. Really threw them off guard."

Beyond the outrageousness, gay liberation was about defining a new form of community and politics for queers, one based on tearing down all boundaries. Gay liberationists chanted as they marched in the streets: "Two, four, six, eight, smash the church, smash the state." Gay men chanted "Ho-ho-homosexual, the ruling class is ineffectual," while lesbians were yelling, "Hey, hey, ho, ho, male supremacy's got to go."

Those early trailblazers were not looking for marriage and corporate jobs or acceptance into the military or the church. They were into communal living and multipartnered sexual arrangements outside of the jurisdiction of the state and the family. They flaunted their difference. They made no apologies. Like their hippie, yippie and countercultural counterparts, they believed in sex, drugs and rock 'n roll. Not to mention truth, justice and a redistribution of wealth.

It wasn't just about meetings and demonstrations. Music, art, poetry and performance marked the new gay consciousness. For the first time ever, out queer artists packed coffeehouses and conference halls with appreciative fans.

It wasn't all a bed of roses. Sexism, transphobia and racism within the nascent movement led to split-offs by women, transgenders and people of color. Women, who suffered a dual oppression, preferred struggling with the homophobia of their straight sisters to dealing with the sexism of their gay brothers. Transgenders felt unwelcome at many gay organizations and were eventually left out of proposed gay rights legislation. Issues raised by people of color were ignored or deemed unimportant. The movement often acted as if it were a private party for white boys.

The result was a multitude of split-off groups that included Radicalesbians, Third World Gay Revolution, STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries), Radicalqueens, and Lesbian Feminist Liberation. Eventually, the more reformist-oriented Gay Activists Alliance would take over the reins from the semi-anarchistic post-Stonewall, consensus-run organizations.

Despite its shortcomings, gay liberation succeeded in making coming out a queer rite of passage. It was a political strategy that affirmed the feminist adage that the personal is political. It was also a revolutionary act at a time when polite company didn't discuss sex, let alone someone's sexual orientation.

My own coming out had all the drama of an Italian opera. How appropriate, considering I come from a working-class, immigrant, southern Italian family in South Philly. Despite a conservative Catholic upbringing, I became radicalized by the time I was 16 or 17, sneaking off to civil rights and antiwar marches.

In the fall of 1969, I started college at Temple University, mainly to avoid the draft. Within no time at all I joined the campus SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), an antiwar group. Then I discovered that the Gay Liberation Front held weekly coffee hours. It was a perfect fit. Filled with revolutionary fervor, I made the queer movement my life. Within weeks, I was secretary, then chair of the group. (Though nonhierarchal, we had to have officers to fulfill the requirements of being a student group.)

One of our key campaigns was pressuring the university to stop funding aversion therapy at a nearby psychiatric institute. A popular form of behavior modification, it involved attaching electrodes to the genitals of gay men, showing them slides of naked

men and then shocking them with electricity, so that they would “lose” the impulse to be aroused by men. It didn’t work, but that didn’t stop the mad doctors. Our campaign eventually got the attention of a local late-night talk show. As chair, I was invited to debate an aversion therapist on the program. Of course, I agreed.

I told my mother the day before. I didn’t tell anyone else. My father freaked when my uncle, a cop, called to say that I had been on TV, wearing blue eye shadow no less! It was not the way to come out to *la famiglia*. My godfather never spoke to me again. My father eventually threw me out of the house. I was lucky: My siblings and my mother became strong supporters. (My father and I made a teary-eyed peace 15 years later, just months before he died of a massive stroke.) Puccini would have had a field day.

The university eventually stopped funding aversion therapy.

At Temple GLF, we continued pushing the envelope as much as we could, running a drag queen for homecoming queen to protest the objectification of women inherent in such competitions. To mess with the minds of the campus ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps) recruiters, I approached their table at a student fair in genderfuck one day and asked to sign up. When they refused, several others who’d planted themselves in the room raced to my aid, yelling and causing a very public scene. Terrified, the recruiters packed up and left.

By far the most controversial thing we did was set up a “Kiss a Queer” booth on Valentine’s Day 1973 outside the student bookstore. We were ahead of our time in using the word “queer.” The booth drew few kisses, but such hostile reactions from students that the Temple News dubbed it the “Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre.” Not only were we taunted and called names, but we also had coins and rolled-up paper tossed at us. To add to the mayhem, mainstream media from near and far showed up after a group of straight jocks put up a “Kiss a Straight” table across from ours and called the press.

Conservative legislators in Harrisburg, the state capital, weren’t too pleased and threatened to cut off funding to the university. I was called into the Office of Student Affairs and read the riot act. Fortunately, the school couldn’t really do anything. We were a sanctioned student group. We had filled out the proper paperwork. At one point the administrator said to me, “You’re not helping your cause any by doing things like this.”

“What cause is that?” I asked.

“To be accepted as normal.”

But we weren’t trying to be “normal”!

Forty years later, I find that “being normal” is more popular than ever. The predominant cry within the LGBT community these days is no longer “smash the church, smash the state.” It’s inclusion (and ordination) in the churches, synagogues and other religious institutions that still oppress us. It’s “marriage equality” for queer couples so that they can have the many benefits the state awards to heterosexual pairings. It’s ending “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” to allow LGBT soldiers to be out of the closet while killing for oil in the Middle East. It’s home ownership, adoption and a lavender picket fence in gentrified neighborhoods where working-class folks used to live.

In many ways, the new millennium gay movement is the antithesis of the early ’70s gay liberation. It cavorts with politicians who may be good on gay issues, but not on concerns affecting other disenfranchised communities. It is in bed with the Democratic Party establishment that gave carte blanche to George Bush to wage two illegal and immoral wars in the Middle East. It courts corporate support for its gala events, even its pride parades, which used to be protest marches and celebrations of the Stonewall Riots. Now those marches seem more of a market than a movement.

The queer movement still hasn’t entirely gotten its act together about sexism, racism or the exclusion of transgenders. The recent controversy over the nixing of transgenders from coverage in the Congressional Employment Non-Discrimination Act by the Human Rights Campaign demonstrates once again that the struggle goes on as much within the community as outside of it. Racist carding policies still exist in some gay bars, as evidenced by a report from the San Francisco Human Rights Commission in 2005 alleging that a bar in the Castro discriminated against African American men.

As we mark the 40th anniversary (June 2009) of the Stonewall Riots that sparked gay liberation, let us remember the radical roots of our modern LGBT movement. Thanks to the efforts of radical queers, ’70s activists passed gay rights bills, got positive images on TV and in the movies, forced the shrinks to drop homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder, halted police raids on gay bars and abolished some state sodomy laws, not to mention making “the love that dare not speak its name” a household word.

We still have a long way to go, but there’s no denying the impact a generation of activists had when they took their lead from

a crowd of rowdy patrons of a West Village bar and demanded an end to this country's homophobic business as usual.

Those brave souls, many of whom are contributors to this book, could never have realized what they were creating when they began meeting in church basements, on college campuses, and out in the streets. Though many have died of AIDS, this collection is a tribute to all of the early activists who blazed trails in those years just after Stonewall.

I still cling to many of the same ideals I had back then. Not only in terms of wanting an end to war and social injustice, but also in believing that the queer movement needs to concern itself with more than strictly gay rights or hate crimes legislation.

According to a study by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Council and the National Coalition for the Homeless, 20 to 40 percent of homeless youth in this country identify as LGBT. In San Francisco, the "gay Mecca," it's 30 to 35 percent. In a city where queers are easily elected to office and the mayor defies state law to marry queer couples, 75 percent of transgenders don't have full-time employment. In that same city, touted in the late '80s as a model of caring for people with AIDS, 14 percent of people with the disease are homeless.

As long as queer people are homeless, hungry and without jobs or medical coverage, as long as LGBT workers don't receive a living wage, as long as the wealth of this country is in the hands of a few, as long as the means of production are owned by that very same monied class, we queers will



Tommi Aviccoli Mecca, 1973

never truly have achieved what gay liberation set out to do four decades ago.

This book represents a snapshot of that moment in time when queers weren't obsessed with tying the knot or picking up a rifle to go off and fight "terrorists." Revolution was in the air. We truly believed that a united front with all oppressed peoples would help us create a better world, one built on inclusion and an equal distribution of wealth and resources.

Relive that dream within the pages of this book.

Tommi Avicolti Mecca
San Francisco, April 2009

Our Passion Shook the World

Martha Shelley

We were hot and rude, joyous and angry, utopian and opinionated. “Nuanced” wasn’t part of our vocabulary. Question authority? We didn’t even recognize it!

July 4, 1968, Philadelphia: A group of gays carrying neatly printed signs with slogans like “Equality for Homosexuals” picketed Independence Hall under the hot sun. The men wore suits and ties, the women wore skirts and nylon stockings. I hated the dress code, hated the passersby who treated us like a sideshow. I particularly remember a chubby boy in shorts who licked the drips off a vanilla ice cream cone as he gazed blankly at the freaks. I lusted after an ice cream, but we had to maintain an orderly, dignified picket line. At the end of the day, I swore I’d never do it again.

December, 1969, Greenwich Village: A freezing day, but I was reasonably cozy in a secondhand suede jacket with only one rip at the elbow. I held up my bundle of papers and cried, “Get your copy of *ComeOut!*, newspaper of the Gay Liberation Front.” A straight couple went by, pushing a stroller. They gave me the freak-show stare, so I shouted, “*ComeOut!* on sale here—find out what your kid will be like when he grows up.” To my delight, they jumped and ran off.

What happened between those two dates was the Stonewall Riot, followed by the founding of the Gay Liberation Front. The history of those events has been told elsewhere. Here I want to talk about our visions for the future and what became of them.

We were anarchic from the outset. Anyone who had a project in mind got together with others of similar inclination and made it happen: a dance, a demonstration, a newspaper. If we had anything resembling a platform, it was best expressed by the resolutions we proposed at ERCHO (the Eastern Regional Conference of Homophile Organizations) in November 1969.

We demanded freedom and self-determination for all minority groups. We condemned the persecution of elements of these

minorities, specifically political prisoners and those accused of crimes without victims.

A member of the Mattachine Society described this resolution as “not even remotely pertinent to the homophile movement.” In a way, he was right. The old homophile movement tried to present gays as just like straights but with a teensy difference—like being left-handed instead of right-handed. The gay liberation movement saw our oppression as one leg of the behemoth that stomped on us and divided our communities—the other legs being male domination, white supremacy and economic exploitation.

October 1970: Demonstrators, including GLF members, gathered in the streets outside the Women’s House of Detention in Greenwich Village, shouting our support for Angela Davis. The inmates called down to us. Most of them had been accused of victimless crimes such as prostitution and possession of drugs. They set fire to bits of paper and waved them about, brief orange flickerings against thick black bars, thin brown arms. I wondered if any of those arms belonged to Angela, or if she was being held in a segregated cell.

A few blocks away, white middle-class lesbians gathered at the Duchess, a popular watering hole. An acquaintance told me how comfortable she felt there, where she didn’t have to consort with the black and Hispanic lesbians who patronized the Big D farther downtown.

Our next resolution at ERCHO was to call for lesbians and gay men to protest the Vietnam War openly as homosexuals.

Before the Stonewall Riot, members of Columbia University’s Student Homophile League (including me) joined an antiwar protest on campus. The other students kept their distance, as though we had measles. When New York GLF participated in a much larger antiwar march, a liberal newspaper columnist dismissed us as the “slim-waisted creeps of the Gay Liberation Front.”

Today the issue the gay community is fighting for isn’t being openly gay in the peace movement; it’s being openly gay in the military. How much more antithetical to the original spirit of GLF can you get? Join an organization where you’re expected to kill and die on command? Nobody could give us orders!

We had other resolutions. We demanded freedom from society’s attempts to define and limit human sexuality. We called for dominion over one’s own body, through sexual freedom without regard to orientation, through freedom to use birth control

and abortion, and through freedom to ingest the drugs of one's choice.

November 1969, the ERCHO conference in Philadelphia: The venue was a lesbian bar with blacked-out windows, warm and a bit stuffy despite the season. Representatives arrived from organizations of vastly different sizes and influence. Mattachine, the largest, had hundreds of members; other organizations consisted of one gay couple and a mimeo machine. I was a member of the Daughters of Bilitis delegation and also caucused with GLF. Debate on the above resolutions was heated. The turning point came when Craig Schoonmaker of Homosexuals Intransigent denounced abortion on the grounds that lesbians don't get pregnant. People thought he was Catholic but he was just misogynist. (In 1977, he formed a political party. Its principles included banning abortion, amputating hands of third-time offenders, trimming the military by firing all women except nurses and secretaries, and reducing the price of phone sex.)

The older DOB women jumped to their feet and raised hell. I knew from private conversations that one of them had been raped and impregnated and had procured an abortion, at a time when that was illegal and dangerous. Craig's speech, and the fury of the women's response, tipped the vote in our favor.

We understood from the get-go that the right to control our bodies was central, and it was exactly what the powers that be wanted to take from us. Our youth gave us the courage of certainty, but left us blind to complexities that would unfold in the course of time.

In those days we demanded the right to be free of unwanted pregnancies. We couldn't have imagined today's demands: the right to inseminate, to adopt and to foster, or for parental rights to be based on raising children together, rather than on mere biology.

Back then, though we wouldn't have argued for heroin, some of us thought that ingesting psychedelic drugs was a positive good. Now I will admit that I could've done with a little less ingestion. But I think most GLFers would still agree that drug use should be decriminalized and the prisons emptied of addicts.

I am still perplexed about the transsexual issue. On the one hand, it is clearly subsumed under the right to control your own body. On the other, the essence of GLF thought (and where it intersected with feminist thought) was that we had the right to be anything we wanted with the bodies we had. That we could

reclaim our bodies from a society that denigrated them, and learn to love them. That the whole gamut of human expression—clothing, gesture, emotion, sexuality—was permitted to anyone. Now it seems that there is considerable social pressure for young lesbians who would have been butch in the old days to alter their bodies, chemically and surgically, and become men. (I don't know whether effeminate men feel the same pressure.) Nobody knows what the long-term consequences of these medical interventions will be.

Despite the unforeseen complexities, the resolutions we drafted 40 years ago are amazingly relevant today. There's still plenty of work to do on all these issues. Yet I'm blown away by what our movement has done so far. In 1969 we couldn't hold hands in public, and now gay marriage is legal in four nations, civil unions in fifteen more. There are gay film festivals everywhere (even Siberia) and a lesbian prime minister in Iceland.

GLFers were young, hot-headed, sure of our own opinions. We quarreled with each other and dissolved into splinter groups: Radicalesbians, Red Butterfly, Third World Gay Revolution, the Effeminists, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, the Gay Activist Alliance. Utopian quests are always short-lived. But if we hadn't exploded into existence, gays would still be pleading politely for acceptance, and the world would still be deaf to their pleas.

Martha Shelley was one of the founders of New York Gay Liberation Front and Radicalesbians, and a member of the collective that produced ComeOut! newspaper. Her articles helped shape the ideology of the gay liberation movement. She currently lives with her wife Sylvia in Portland, Oregon, where they are active in the local Code Pink chapter.

Radicalqueens Manifesto #1, 1973

Whereas we are tired of being the brunt of most straight oppression, including fairy jokes, physical assaults, and snickering stares;

whereas we are tired of the oppression of straight-identified machismo gays, including remarks about the “tacky queens,” denial of queens as representative of the gay community, and being looked down upon;

whereas gay liberation movements have often denied our right to be ourselves in public and denied our very existence while in the same breath patting us on the ass and telling us we are equal (as long as we remain Uncle Toms);

whereas we have decided that macho straight identification is psychologically oppressive and destructive, we have banded together in a union of Radical Queens: to shatter myths, ZAP! our oppressor (both straight and gay), and thereby stand up and get out right to be ourselves both in the straight and in the gay communities, including wearing makeup, doing drag, and other femme-identified activity that any queen decides expresses him or herself!!!!



The cover of the second Radical Queen magazine, 1973

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The Radicalqueens Trans-formation

Cei Bell

If Tommi Aviccoli Mecca and I had been pretty queens or conventional gay men who fit in, RadicalQueens probably would never have happened. Pretty queens didn't spend Saturday nights writing manifestos.

To understand where RadicalQueens fit in with regard to gay liberation, you have to understand the time period. In the early '70s, gay life was an adventure. Today any CPA can be gay. Back then you had to at least be interesting. Gay life was a swirling mix of the Beats and bohemia of the older generation and the hippie/ counterculture, feminist and other liberation groups with the whisper of leather BD/SM, which was closeted even among gays. Gays were just beginning to dance in bars. I think the first dance song I heard was "Popcorn" in the Allegro bar, which I had snuck into surrounded by GAA members after a meeting. We started having Gay Dance fundraisers for GAA where we took an enormous space and people paid a small amount to dance. If you didn't have the money, you volunteered. Gay activism had not yet become professional.

In 1972 in Philadelphia, there were maybe 200 people total who were out of the closet. Of those 200 people, about 70 people met once a week for a meeting at Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), a new militant gay civil rights group formed within two years after the Stonewall Riots. GAA was primarily interested in the rights of gay men and was struggling to accept that lesbians were not subservient.

The interests and needs of transsexuals and drag queens ("transgender" had not been coined yet) were not important. Gay activists wanted to establish that gay men were as masculine as straight men. Concerning themselves with the rights and issues of transgender people was contrary to their goals. If queens talked about being discriminated against or physically abused, we were told that if we were more masculine it wouldn't happen.

There were three drag bars in Philadelphia. Miss P's, at 19th and Lombard, was run by a drag queen named Patti Paige and her

husband. Miss P's had weekend drag shows that imitated Broadway and Las Vegas routines on a tiny stage. Patti Paige was fond of Carol Channing numbers and tap dance routines. Miss P's had a combination lock on its entrance door. If you didn't know the combination you couldn't gain entrance. This served to keep out homophobes and the police. It seemed like a metaphor for the period. In order to be gay you had to figure out codes and puzzles.

The Forrest Showbar on Quince Street also had drag shows. Then there was the 13 Club on 13th and Locust. It was the most notorious and colorful of the three. The 13 Club didn't have a show. Its customers were the show: Teenage drag queens, transsexuals, sailors, Marines and Mafia men. I remember talking to a guy in a shiny suit who didn't look like a truck driver, who told me he had just driven a truckload of cigarettes from North Carolina. I didn't understand why he would go all the way to North Carolina to get cigarettes. Maybe I was a little green. The 13 Club had a five-foot-five butch dyke doorman named Larry who would easily throw six-foot-three guys out on the street.

There were two lesbian bars that were both named Rusty's (only in Philadelphia). One was located in the downtown theater district, the other in Chinatown. The main white gay male bars were the Allegro at Broad and Spruce Streets (now the Kimmel Center), and the Steps on Delancey Street. Both were known to have carding policies that excluded blacks. Spruce Street was the main gay street, particularly west of Broad. The Ritz was located in a separate black gay area north of Market that has now been developed out of existence by the Convention Center and the Criminal Justice Center.

I came out at the age of 16 in 1971. A year before that, in 1970, a teacher had announced I was gay at the so-called progressive Parkway Program High School. I might have been the first officially "out" student in the Philadelphia public school system. My time in the public school system was spent trying to avoid getting beaten up. I had been beaten up constantly in junior high school, including being beaten by a gym teacher. It almost seemed normal. When I was seven a homophobic adult man tried to kill me. He chased me for two blocks, from 19th to 21st and Fitzwater. Somebody saw me screaming and told my parents and I was punished because nice middle-class black children don't act up in public. Especially before civil rights, acting inappropriately could get you killed, so discipline was a necessity.

Besides being obviously effeminate, I developed small breasts when I was twelve. It's called gynecomastia. I had to endure gym classes with my breasts exposed. Boys would beat me up during classes and teachers would pretend not to notice. The word "homosexual" as a pejorative was hurled at me. I had to guess what it meant because my parents didn't discuss sex with me. I didn't know what sex was, let alone homosexual.

I started reading psychiatry books. That was all that was available on the subject in the library. The books said that only 5 percent of homosexuals were effeminate (another new word). There I was, a middle-class Negro homosexual (I hadn't heard of transsexuals yet) who was effeminate. A minority within a minority within a minority within a minority. I also learned that a favored treatment for homosexuality was electroshock therapy.

The beatings at school left me depressed and suicidal. To make matters worse, my half-brother, who was 19 years older, would come into my parents' house when they weren't there and beat up my brother and me. He would threaten to kill me, yet no one would believe me. When my tonsils were taken out at Children's Hospital, I woke up at 5 a.m. with an orderly on top of me—wrestling, I thought. I didn't tell anyone because I knew I would be blamed for getting beaten up. No one would do anything about it anyway. It only occurred to me recently that he wasn't trying to beat me up.

The public school solution to my getting beaten up was to suggest to my parents that I be sent to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist was a nice enough young doctor who showed me pictures of boys who also had breasts. For three years, he asked me why I thought other boys beat me up. I saved up my money, bought a copy of *Playboy* and brought it to counseling to convince him I was straight. I was deathly afraid that if I didn't, they would remove my breasts or electrocute me straight via shock treatments. Martial arts classes would have been a better use of time and money.

Eventually, the sessions ended and he told my parents I was a perfectly normal boy. I should have won a Tony or at least an Obie: Best Live Performance by a Transsexual Pretending to be Straight.

The high school I attended, The Parkway Program, was a progressive school based on A. S. Neill's Summerhill, the original alternative educational institution. On the first day, teachers said that you could do anything you want so long as you don't hurt anybody. Some of the teachers were hippies. Some of them

semi-openly slept with students. There were teachers who came to class speeding and tripping. When I walked into a photography class the male instructor was sitting with two teenage girls discussing sex. One of the girls asked me who I wanted to ball. I heard the same teacher paid for a teenage student's abortion. I had my first joint in a chemistry class, and the teacher lit it. The teacher overseeing the school underground newspaper *The Rancid Roach* (we changed the name weekly) asked me to draw roaches for the cover. I didn't understand that he didn't mean the insects. Another time he seemed to be trying to start an orgy in an English class.

I was in a Brandywine Workshop group exhibition of silk-screens at the Museum of Art when I was 15, but nobody came to see it. There were sensitivity and encounter groups and we were encouraged to be honest with each other. I still got beaten up at Parkway. My solution was to avoid classes. I found a leaflet for gay liberation that proclaimed "Come Out Come Out Wherever You Are!" and went to the Homophile Action League office. It was closed during the day, and I had to be home by 5:30 p.m. The office of the Resistance, the antiwar group, was open during the day. I thought this would be similar. Then, I tried talking to two teachers and a student about it, which was a mistake.

Shortly afterwards, I walked in on the female teacher I had talked to while she was having sex with an underage male teenage student. She stopped me from taking art classes and announced to the school that I was a homosexual. She was also having an interracial extramarital relationship with the administrator of our unit. They thought I knew about their involvement because of a comment I made to her suggesting they looked like a couple. (There was an interracial marriage in my family. We lived in a middle-class white neighborhood. Nobody told me this wasn't normal.) At that point, the administrator started harassing me, and he beat me up. Being teachers and administrators, they could say anything about a student and get away with it. This was before anyone heard of child abuse.

I was being beaten up at home, at school by students, and now by the administrator. I ran away from home and came back. I went back to school, was expelled and ran away. I was reinstated and ran away again. I dropped out on my 17th birthday because they couldn't force me to get beaten up anymore.

In the middle of all this, I met some teenaged drag queens in Rittenhouse Square and found my way out of the closet. In this

colorful unisex, post-Sgt. Pepper world, it was difficult for me to recognize them at first, but out of the corner of my eye I saw a tall, skinny, effeminate African American male chasing a light-skinned, equally skinny and tall, African American male through the Square in a pair of clogs. I thought, "What was that?"

Soon after, I met a Puerto Rican drag queen/freak in the Square and I was officially brought out of my transparent closet. In this new world, I came to know a Dickensian group of throwaway/runaway kids from 14 to about 20 who hung out at the Square, Penn Center Skating Rink in the winter, 13th and Locust and Dewey's, an infamous diner chain popular with queens and gay men. That was Center City before the skyscrapers were built, back when it was a lovely forgotten ruin. The kids came from almost every background you can imagine. They survived any way they could. If you were pretty there was prostitution and the men who would give you money.

I wasn't pretty, which in the long run was a benefit. I had kinky unmanageable hair, brown skin and thick Coke-bottle eye-glasses when the beauty ideal was blue-eyed blonds. I met other teenage queens who had to leave school and run away from home. Many of them were talented but had no way to use their gifts. For example, I knew two young transsexual concert pianists, one black and one white. The white pianist, "Stephanie," was harassed and pursued by "Jack," an older pedophile, while she was still in high school in Delaware. Instead of receiving any sort of protection or help, Stephanie was expelled from high school and kicked out of her home. Having nowhere to go, she moved in with Jack and they moved to 9th and Spruce in Philadelphia, which was a gay slum at the time. Jack was an alcoholic and abusive, but Stephanie was trapped. One time I was over there and he accused me of stealing \$5 and forcibly strip-searched me. After all my clothes were off he suddenly remembered where the \$5 was. The \$5 was never missing, he just wanted to strip search a 16-year-old black kid. He also told everybody I had stolen \$5 to justify his strip-searching me. Later when I went to a GAA political meeting at a member's house, the host asked me to leave because he heard I had stolen \$5. Even though my middle-class parents had moved into a white neighborhood and I had gone to a mixed high school, I had to come out of the closet to hear someone call me nigger to my face.

The queens made me aware that my problem with violent men was not mine alone. They even had a name for those men,

“neshineau” or “nesh,” for short. In addition to functioning as a noun, it was also an early alert to start running when fagbashers were nearby. I began to hear about queens and transsexuals being murdered when a drag queen was found murdered in an alley near 13th Street in the fall of 1971.

I had been in GAA for about a year before Tommi Avicoli Mecca and I first spoke to each other. One June evening after a meeting, we shared a table at Day’s Jr., a restaurant (now a bank) at 18th and Spruce. Tommi and I had a mutual friend, another femme queen named Michael. Tommi was involved in the sort of organizing work that he was always doing. He had long straightened hair and aviator glasses. I thought he resembled Gloria Steinem. Tommi was dating a friend of mine.

One day in December, Tommi, his boyfriend and I were sitting on Jerry’s bed smoking a joint. Jerry was a friend that I sometimes slept with and occasionally lived with. His apartment on Spruce Street was one of two apartments, the other being longtime queer activist Kiyoshi Kuromiya’s, that every teenage gay kid and every teenage hippie passed through in Center City. One of the guys made a comment about being butch. Jerry affirmed that he was butch.

“You’re butch?” I asked. It was a query rather than a challenge to the veracity of his statement.

“What did you think I am?” replied Jerry.

Actually I didn’t think that we had defined it. Tommi and I started questioning what butch and femme were. Was Jerry butch because he took the “dominant” role in sex? What if Tommi wanted to do the inserting, which wouldn’t happen with his boyfriend, who was also butch like Jerry.

I had been having feminist thoughts. All of my female friends were feminists and I wanted to be contemporary and modern. But what did that mean that I wanted feminism and yet I was a femme transsexual? I knew that I didn’t want a relationship like my mother had where my father controlled everything. Tommi and I started this discussion and soon we had left the guys behind on the bed.

That night, we formed a caucus of GAA. I first came up with the name RadicalQueens, but we thought that was too far out to bring to the meeting so we started out as the Queen’s Liberation Caucus.

Queen’s Liberation was a consciousness-raising group for queens. We brought up issues that GAA and the gay liberation

movement didn't: Primarily, our right to express a nonconforming gender identity and to live without the threat of violence from men. Tommi had grown up with the similar experience of being beaten and harassed at school and in his neighborhood. He couldn't ride his bike in his South Philadelphia neighborhood without men hurling epithets and bottles at him. A few months later, we changed the name to RadicalQueens and became a committee of GAA. We soon had our own distinct identity.

I didn't make it to the announcement of RadicalQueens in GAA. An abusive man I had been involved with drugged me and raped me. Tommi had also survived being raped by a lover. I was violently raped in Fairmount Park a year later. In none of these situations was calling the police a reasonable possibility. Sexual violence against transgender people is rarely, if ever, reported. Years later I took an informal survey at a meeting. Out of about 15 people in the room 14 had been sexually abused in childhood.

Tommi and I started writing manifestos. We actually thought we could have a radical feminist, gender-free revolution. We had a truly motley group. There was no membership requirement. There were no dues. We came up with ideas, and we did things.

We published a magazine, the *Radical Queen*. The first issue was produced on a Gestetner printer. Once upon a time in the olden days of the previous century when you walked five miles in the snow to get to your consciousness-raising group, if you wanted to make multiple copies you would type and draw on a thick stencil and then put it on a Gestetner. It was a printing press found in most schools. It had a big drum filled with ink and a pad that soaked up the ink. You would press the stencil over the ink pad and rotate the drum a few times until the pad stencil soaked through and then you were ready to print.

We printed 500 copies of the first *Radical Queen* that way. The first issue was a collective effort. No one had a byline and we all took responsibility for the magazine. We published a manifesto. We quickly discovered that we didn't want to take responsibility for each other's opinions, so in the next issue our names appeared with our articles.

We also found that there was a better way to print. I was living in a communal house with a former draft dodger who had been recently released from prison. He worked for the leftist Omega Press. For \$20 we could get a professionally printed, double-sided sheet of paper that would be cut into the new improved *Radical Queen*. I

experimented with writing poetry (who didn't?) and found there is something worse than not being published: publishing bad poetry.

In the third issue, I wrote my first article, a critique of sexism in advertising entitled "The Commercialization of Emily." We had a Pagan Page written by Phillip Janison-Marra. There was a Castration Department where we ran quotes from sexist men. It featured a drawing of a man's genitalia on a guillotine (entrée in a French restaurant). Heather, blond, sleek, beautiful, like that unfortunate girl on the Munsters, drew a cartoon character called SuperQueen who vaguely looked like me in radical drag. SuperQueen introduced "Cecil B. Demented" in a segment about the Bible. I believe John Waters owes us money for copyright infringement.

We had forums on drag. There was a senior drag queen named Rusty who gave drag instruction. Her brother was in the Olympics. She had a bumper sticker on her makeup case that read "United States Drag Team."

When GAA was planning for the 1973 Gay Pride march, all the committees said they would have a float. Our committee and another were the only ones who actually did. We displayed different types of drag. I did radical drag with a dress, boots and a construction helmet I borrowed from Richie, who did butch/SM drag. Our float was built by Jerry and Mark, gay hippies who lived in Powelton Village before it was expensive real estate.

When Henri David, who had a gala drag contest every Halloween, announced a contest where the most beautiful transsexual would receive an all-expenses-paid sex change operation, we protested. Transsexuality wasn't about beauty, and David backed down.

In 1973 RadicalQueens performed the first benefit for the Gay Community Center that years later in another incarnation became the William Way Community Center. We were infamous for our drag shows. We took tacky and made it an art form. We did the sickest drag shows on Earth. At one of them, Saj, my big brother of color, performed the Who's "Acid Queen." Tommi played the deaf, dumb, blind kid. He wore a toga that Saj designed and nothing else. Everytime Saj lifted him, the audience got quite a show. When the movie version of the rock opera came out, I thought it was tame. Saj was better than Tina Turner.

Saj directed us in a takeoff of the Supremes. I was a Supreme. The surprising part is I was the only black member of the group. Diana Ross was played by blond, willowy Heather. In our consciousness-

raising group Heather would talk about being beautiful. She was buying hundred-dollar shoes when a hundred dollars would pay your rent for a month. She would say, "When you're beautiful you don't know if somebody likes you because of you or because you're beautiful. You don't know what it's like when you're beautiful!" We did another act where Tom Jones, played by Heather, lip-synched into a dildo used as a mike and two go-go boys, played by myself and an obese queen (we didn't believe in typecasting), attacked Tom Jones and carried him off the stage.

We performed the last RadicalQueen Revue in 1974 at the first Gay Coffeehouse on 3rd Street between Market and Arch. Today everybody flocks to Old City for First Friday art shows and the hip bars and restaurants. Back then, nobody went there. Not even artists. I had a record that had Dionne Warwick singing Barbra Streisand songs. Tommi had a record of Barbra Streisand singing Dionne Warwick songs. We tried doing a Warwick/Streisand "reading session" for one of the revues. "Reading" was a term queens used to insult each other. I was taught how to "read" by experts but rarely do it because it isn't fair to use against mere mortals. During the performance my wig spun off my head into the audience and was thrown back at me. Memories

I don't remember the year, maybe 1974, a group of us celebrated Christmas Eve together in a cheap Chinese restaurant. Tommi and I have continued celebrating Christmas with each other ever since, though now we do it in spirit because of the distance. The most precious gift RadicalQueens gave me is my best friend since 1972, Tommi.

How could the past be so simultaneously horrible and yet so wonderful and sweet? I was abused and had to run away from home and drop out of school. I was sexually assaulted and raped twice. I didn't think I had any future as a homely queen with Coke-bottle glasses.

Yet, at the worst moment of my life, I met the most wonderful people and saved my life.

Cei Bell is a writer and artist. Her articles have appeared in the Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Daily News, Philadelphia Gay News, City Paper, Philadelphia Tribune, Au Courant and Blackout Magazine. She was also on the staff of the Gayzette and wrote the workshop plans for the Conference on Racism and Sexism in Lesbian and Gay Institutions. She is finishing a children's book.

The Radicalesbian Story: An Evolution of Consciousness

Ellen Shumsky

Note from the author: The first half of this article originally appeared in the December–January 1970 issue of ComeOut! The second half was to have been published in a 1972 issue of ComeOut! Sometime before production, the print shop that housed the galleys was raided (perpetrators unknown—at least to me) and the galleys were destroyed. The latter half of this article, tracing the rise and fall of Radicalesbians, never made it to press. This is the first publication of this herstory in its entirety.

Radicalesbians began during the dreary months of the dying winter of 1970. A nucleus of Gay Liberation Front women, with a growing women's consciousness, began to feel the need for an all-women's GLF dance.

They had previously been working on and attending GLF dances, which were overwhelmingly attended by males. The oppressive atmosphere was a simulated gay men's bar—an overcrowded, dimly lit room where most human contact was limited to groping and dryfucking, packed together subway rush-hour style.

Earlier attempts by women and some men to create an ambience that encouraged group dancing and space for conversation were nullified by the "pack-'em-in" attitude of the GLF men running the dances. There were so many men at each event that the women felt lost to each other. It was intolerable to many, but the women put up with it, hoping it would change. Finally when it became obvious it was only growing worse as the weather grew warmer, GLF women decided to have an all-women's dance.

This first dance was a great success: an environment of women—rapping, drinking, dancing, relating with fluidity and grace—was a new and beautiful phenomenon. That dance was followed by several more. Besides enjoying the events, the women had to meet and work together. Weekly meetings of GLF women became routine. This provided a fine opportunity to work collectively and to get to know one another.

At the same time, something else was happening. Some GLF women, together with feminists from the Women's Liberation Movement, had formed a consciousness-raising group. Out of these meetings two major accomplishments materialized: the writing of the lesbian feminist manifesto, "The Woman Identified Woman"; and a plan to confront the issue of lesbianism at the NOW (National Organization for Women)-sponsored 2nd Congress to Unite Women.

At the Congress, on May 1, 1970, 20 women wearing lavender T-shirts stenciled with LAVENDER MENACE liberated the microphone from the line-up of planned speakers and initiated a forum on why lesbianism was the most threatening and most avoided issue in the Women's Movement. The entire audience of 400 women related to the topic of lesbianism through their own personal experiences and feelings. This was followed by two days of workshops attended by more than 200 women. The paper "The Woman Identified Woman" was distributed. Our resolutions (we hope) became part of the report of the conference: "WOMEN'S LIBERATION IS A LESBIAN PLOT. WE ARE ALL LESBIAN." Instead of purging lesbians from the Women's Movement, we will proudly own and assert the woman-identified woman in all of us.

The aftermath of the congress coup is not so well known. We called for consciousness-raising groups and 50 interested women met the call. Four groups were set up—with new women from the NOW Congress and Lavender Menace lesbians participating in each group. Many of the women in these groups were straight-identified women who wanted to confront the issue of lesbianism and perhaps the lesbian in themselves. A very large majority turned out to be active lesbians, latent lesbians, closeted lesbians, one-beautiful-experience lesbians, freaked-out lesbians, spaced-out lesbians. From the ranks of the Women's Liberation Movement they responded.

After having related for months and years to the broader women's issues at the sacrifice of their own sexual identities, these women were ready now to come out—to use their energies to create a lesbian community and to make sure that the concepts of primary value and commitment between women, developed in the paper "Woman Identified Woman," were taken on by the Women's Liberation Movement. These sisters started coming to our weekly GLF women's meetings, and as word spread through the grapevine, more and more unaffiliated women started attending those meetings.

At that point, the various groups of women had so thoroughly merged that the name GLF Women seemed inappropriate; it was obvious we were an independent, autonomous group and while there were some women who continued to relate to GLF, there were many feminists who felt they could not affiliate with a male-dominated organization that was in large part sexist. We decided to drop the name GLF Women and create a treasury to relate to our own needs and the needs of other gay women. The money was taken from the GLF community center fund—that portion that had been contributed by the women who had been attending GLF dances. It was enough to fund our first independent dance under our new name, Radicalesbians.

In this way, a movement of radical/revolutionary gay women organically coalesced—not artificially out of some theoretical political necessity, but through the natural flow of our experiences and changes in consciousness. Difficulties were anticipated because priorities differed. Some women felt themselves to be an arm of the Women's Liberation Movement. They viewed the struggle as one waged by women against male supremacy. They experienced their primary identity as women (with a difference). Others felt themselves to be in close affiliation with GLF; they continued to relate to GLF and viewed the struggle as one primarily between heterosexuals and homosexuals. Still others saw their situation as unique—a struggle against sexism through the prism of a gay woman's consciousness. Some women had not shaped or articulated their politics. They only knew that they liked to be with their sisters and wanted to help. With these differences we began meeting and working together, respecting if not loving each other.

Because of our past experiences in the Gay Liberation Front and other movement groups, we came together committed to finding an organizational form that would avoid the pitfalls of entrenched leadership hierarchies. We did not want a situation in which a few leaders represent and run an organization in the interests of an apathetic community and ultimately in their own self-interest, as their community abandons a boring, non-growth situation. A marathon weekend was planned, during which randomly arranged small groups of women talked about the issues they felt a gay women's organization should address. The 50 or so topics that emerged from this marathon weekend were written up on poster boards that became our scrolls. These were ceremonially unrolled

at meetings each week and became known as our "agenda." In the course of discussing each item on the agenda it was hoped that the shape of our organization would emerge. It was not to be pre-defined but to assume the shape of our collective needs.

Immediately adopted was the lot system for randomly selecting women to write up minutes, speak at colleges and attend to the variety of tasks that are ordinarily dealt with by an election or a volunteer system. The lot system ideally would involve every woman in all the tasks of the organization and protect the group from domination by strong women with better-developed skills to the detriment of everyone else's growth. Our discussions followed the procedure of each woman who spoke calling on the next woman to her left who wished to speak. Thus we avoided a chairwoman and the kinds of manipulation that are possible when one person becomes the center of an organizational universe.

However, in spite of all our efforts to keep a leadership syndrome from establishing itself, it became clear that one was emerging. Women with organizational experience and clearly articulated political ideas tended to dominate the discussions. They had the most to say and spoke every time during the circle go-arounds. They became vortices around which other women's vague, ill-defined or scarcely felt political inclinations flowed. And while their ideas were needed, women grew to resent them because it was felt that somehow they were responsible for this failing attempt at a truly participatory form.

When some of the most committed and articulate women decided to leave New York and stopped coming to the meetings, it became clear how much of the group energy had centered on their seeming political clarity. Their organizational experience, well-developed feminist consciousness, commitment and dedication to the necessity of constructing a viable large group political form had fed and directed the group. In their absence the group floundered.

For a while, one woman, clearly committed to large group politics, functioned as an unacknowledged leader, but that caused conflict with the basic premise of the necessity for a nonleader, nonhierarchical form. A fundamental contradiction in the situation was brought into sharp focus. On one level the group took responsibility and understood that a leader was created and indulged out of fears and weakness. On another gut level, it was felt that this situation inhibited our growth and kept us locked into old oppressive forms.

Instead of dealing with these contradictions, the group began to direct its frustration and resentment at its most visible target—the leader.

During this time, attendance at the meetings began to rapidly decline. Perhaps some women were disgusted at what seemed like an obvious hypocrisy. Perhaps they were disappointed and not committed enough to struggle. Perhaps they simply did not know what to do. But the fact was that numbers and energy were diminishing. Then the scapegoated leader, feeling frustrated and alienated in the face of group resentment, believing that she had clarified her priorities for herself and they were not being supported by the group, left to begin new work.

Meetings became more directionless, awkward and unfulfilling. Radicalesbians gradually abandoned all the forms the agenda so gloriously extolled. Each week, instead of 50 or 60 women, only 15 or 20 would appear, many of these new women coming for the first time, never to be seen again—they probably wondered what the desultory, unfocused meeting was all about. It was impossible to re-create the group history for these women. There was always some business to attend to that had practical currency and it seemed impossible to explain all the twists and turns of our group process. It had been a process to be lived, not one to be described or prescribed.

At this time, some members were very much locked into the need for weekly meetings because they perceived Radicalesbians as an organization whose membership came together once a week and could be counted. There was also empathy for the women who were coming for the first time and trying to connect—lonely women, women with urgent needs for community and half-formed visions of a new lifestyle. It was felt that Radicalesbians had to provide a connecting point, a way of opening our embryonic community. Frantic efforts were made to keep the organization together despite the obvious absence of creative spontaneity. Trapped in an organizational mindset, unable to see any alternatives, some women became obsessed with revitalizing the weekly meetings that seemed to constitute the essence of Radicalesbians. Efforts were made to get the “dropouts” to return to meetings, and when that didn’t work, anger, resentment and self-righteous denunciations were directed at these sisters for their apparent abandonment of the struggle.

During this time, the so-called dropouts, disheartened and de-vitalized by the alienating atmosphere of the large group rhetoric, had not just stopped attending meetings but had recentered themselves in their consciousness-raising groups, where there were feelings of warmth and trust. These women also began to move out into other groups and activities that spoke to their political needs: squatters actions, print-shop media centers, the Women's Center, the now woman-controlled underground newspaper *RAT*, a newly formed Radicalesbian group in Philadelphia, campus groups. Because of their negative experiences in the Radicalesbian weekly meetings, they carried the awareness that a dynamic of engagement and affinity was essential to their work. More and more, in addition to doing actions, groups began focusing on their relationships as an area of primary concern for political struggle.

When dialogue was reestablished between "dropouts" and "hold-outs" what we came to realize was that old conceptions of organization had blinded us to the evolutionary process moving through us. A new gestalt had formed in the shape of our own needs and the connections we were making with each other that no organization could contain. Radicalesbians had been trying to fit a life force into an arbitrary form. There was a new realization that Radicalesbians was not a thing but a process, a flow, a way of looking at life from our own centers and trying to live in accordance with that self-knowledge. We saw the flow all around us in the changes we made in our lives: quitting alienating, deadening, humiliating jobs; telling our parents and friends about our gay selves; moving into collectives to create chosen families; working on projects and activities that are alive and meaningful. Perhaps the voyage was launched from the weekly meetings, but the reality had become that women were leaving home and moving into new affinity and interest groups.

This is the herstory of the process that Radicalesbians underwent from 1970 to 1971 in New York City. During that time, spontaneously, lesbian feminist groups formed all over the country, each undergoing its own evolutionary process. This explosion confirms that we were not an organization but a movement—a consciousness that continues to live and grow whenever it awakens in the hearts and minds of gay women.

Ellen Shumsky was a young, closeted Brooklyn-born schoolteacher studying photography in France when the Gay Liberation Front was formed in the summer of 1969. She immediately returned from France and spent the next three years immersed in GLF and Radicalesbian activism under the name Ellen Bedoz. Her photos appeared in the GLF newspaper ComeOut! as well as in numerous counterculture anthologies of the time, including Jerry Rubin's We Are Everywhere. She was one of the authors of the lesbian feminist manifesto "The Woman Identified Woman" and a founding member of Radicalesbians. For the past 30 years, she has been a psychotherapist in private practice. She writes about and teaches postmodern psychoanalysis. Her Greenwich Village office is around the corner from the Stonewall.

DYKETACTICS! Notes Towards an Un-Silencing

Paola Bacchetta

What can one say about the mid-1970s in the United States except that it was a particularly turbulent and exciting time for many of us who lived it?

Throughout that period I was deeply involved with DYKETACTICS!, a lesbian political group formed in Philadelphia. DYKETACTICS! membership was fluid, with no clear borders, though it crystallized here and there during certain actions. We came together from many backgrounds: African American, Chinese, Latina, mixed race, Native American and ethnicities generally arranged under the rubric of White such as Irish, Italian and Jewish of several national origins. There were many religious backgrounds: Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Jewish and Protestant. We spanned several classes: mainly working class and middle class, but also very poor and upper middle class.

Most of us were born in the United States but some were immigrants. Our ages spanned from the teens to the late 20s. Most of us worked together at Alexandria Books, the city's feminist and lesbian bookstore. A few of us were students. A few of us were unemployed. Together we were committed to lesbian struggles. Most of us had come from and remained within other movements: for national liberation, Black liberation and civil rights, anarchist and socialist movements, and so on. As a group we saw our liberation as inseparably encompassing struggles against lesbophobia, sexism, racism, poverty, neocolonialism, capitalism and the destruction of the environment.

What I remember most about DYKETACTICS! is how together, over time, we constructed a way of life, deep affective-emotional relations and a common, inclusive politics of daily engagement in constructive political battle. These three aspects of our lives were inseparable.

Before we realized that we had come together as a political group, and even had decided upon the group's name, most of us had lived together collectively, mainly in two houses just blocks

apart in a low-income, predominantly Black but also mixed area of Philadelphia. I was the youngest member and was given the nickname Tyke Dyke (as in “Hey Tyke Dyke, where are you?”). Sherrie, who was closest to my age, also soon came to be called Tyke Dyke. With time, as our friendship deepened and we ended up configuring many political actions together, Sherrie and I decided to name ourselves The Invincible Tyke Dyke Duo (as in “Ah-hem, hey everyone, listen, The Invincible Tyke Dyke Duo has decided to organize a graffiti zap”). These terms of endearment, of course, were also terms of relationality that we constructed together.

While DYKETACTICS! was very far from separatism *politically*, the collective home space I lived in with other DYKETACTICS! members began as separatist space before opening up. Initially, in 1975, no men were allowed to enter. Not even the gas meter readers. Every month whoever answered the meter man’s knock at the front door sent him packing. For the longest time we received, month after month by mail, written warnings from the city about the inaccessibility of our gas meter. One day, one of our housemates got fed up with all the notices. She called the City and demanded that they send us a woman meter reader. Sherrie and I were convinced that this action, if multiplied in other households, would help women get jobs. Instead, the City decided to shut off our gas. After that, we had to let the male gas reader in every month.

Perhaps the biggest change in our home space came, however, when we decided to do something about our landlord, who was also the slumlord of most of our neighborhood. We eventually opened our doors wide in order to organize against him. It began after we formed community with our neighbors. Most were single working mothers. We encountered them while walking past each other’s front porches, on the streets, in the corner store. We started talking together regularly about everything and anything: the weather, the trees, food prices, children dodging cars, flowers, stray animals, music, the news. And finally, our houses. Most were rather dilapidated, even falling apart. Some had little or no heat in winter. In one, the plumbing didn’t work.

Among our neighbors there were two elderly Latina lesbians. They were butch/femme identified and had been together for most of their lives. They were known, respected and liked in the neighborhood. At one point the butch lost her job and they fell behind on rent. Soon our slumlord threatened to evict them. When I found out, I went home, told everyone and suggested we invite them to

live with us until the butch found a job. At our dinner table there were mixed reactions. There was a bit of grumbling about reproductions of hetero-normativity and monogamy-conformity. Some felt that lesbian monogamy was about reproducing the relational modes of hetero-normative marriage, which was historically based in the appropriation of women. We desired to live and relate differently, outside this oppressive mold. Some felt that the constant acting out of dominant, alienating relationalities under our own roof would become an energy drain. But very soon our discussion gave way to a dialogue about basic lesbian, race and class solidarities. Everyone agreed they could move in.

Once the two came to live with us I realized we had a similar rhythm. I got up early for the revolution (as I was convinced it would arrive any morning sometime soon). They got up early out of habit. We ended up having breakfast together often. I was unfamiliar with their generation of “nonpoliticized” lesbians, but still felt they were family. One of the first things I noticed was that the butch liked to do work the rest of us considered femme (she cooked, made coffee, washed clothes), while the femme was very skilled at work we all considered butch (she repaired loose wooden planks on our steps, fixed our old TV, and so on). They fit very well into our heterogeneous home and they contributed to our collectivity in every way possible. I learned quite a bit from listening to them talk about their lives. Eventually the butch got a job and they moved to another block within the neighborhood. Today my strongest memory of them is that they were truly very deeply in love.

One winter, most of the children of a neighbor, a single mother, got constantly ill with colds and flu. One caught pneumonia. Our neighbor, the children’s mother, had no health insurance, could not afford a baby sitter and could not afford to take off from work to stay with them. The situation completely drained her. Many neighbors pitched in to help out. One day, in exasperation, we decided we should take some organized collective action. We called a meeting at our home to discuss housing rights and suing our slumlord for neglect. About 15 neighbors came, including a few men. Everyone was on board. Though we had no money for a lawyer, we began to build a collective case and we let our slumlord know about it. We never got to court, but that was fine with us. Under duress, the slumlord made some dramatic improvements to avoid getting sued. We felt we’d won at least a small victory.

I am not sure how to communicate the excitement I felt every day during that period. I lived as though the revolution would arrive any minute, preferably at 8 o'clock in the morning. Even though it didn't, something new was always going on. We were an activist home and we put into practice whatever ideas we were convinced of at the time. For example, across our disparate cultures and racialized positionalities, each of us had been taught, albeit often differently, a whole range of types of shame for our bodies. How could we analyze it together? Move through it, get past it? We tried out many ways of living within our bodies fully. Bodies that come in all shapes and sizes. All colors. All ages. Bodies from which liquids flow: menstruation, perspiration, sexual fluids. Bodies that feel. We tried sitting together in the nude to get comfortable with ourselves and each other. We tried using natural sponges, which was all the rave in many lesbian milieux at the time, instead of pads or tampons for menstruation. The sponges were infinitely more comfortable.

One day, Barbara used her blood-saturated sponge to paint a poem on the tiles of our bathroom wall. After that, I painted my bedroom and the bathroom walls white so we could write and draw on them with our blood-saturated sponges and see the work very clearly. We all began to look forward to every new period: It meant new poetry, art, imaginings, life.

Sponges aside, our home was in general full of poetry, music and theater. Julie Blackwomon and Barbara Ruth both wrote and published brilliant poetry. Both shared their work at readings, on alternative radio and in print. Kathy Fire, Linda, Mojo and I wrote and played music. We animated many an evening at home and many a demonstration in the streets. I wrote the music for Julie's "Revolutionary Blues" and for Barbara's "Powers Are Around" poem. And once Julie and I did a show together on lesbians of color on our local feminist radio station in which she read, I played, and finally I sang her poem "Revolutionary Blues." We also experimented with music and the power of vibrations and energies. With Mojo on flute and me on guitar, we explored healing tones. We were sure we'd found the perfect formula. When anyone in or connected to DYKETACTICS! fell ill, we played for her until she was well again. Monica was an actress in the theater group Rites of Women. The group wrote its own plays and performed them widely.

DYKETACTICS! and our allies in Philadelphia were deeply

involved as lesbians in our own liberation, which, given the heterogeneity of subjects under the rubric “lesbian,” we conceptualized in the widest of terms. DYKETACTIONS! actions ranged from court cases to daily creative public work across the very local to national and transnational scales. For example, to get messages into the public space in Philly, there were “graffiti zaps” on billboards, subway walls, and buildings.

DYKETACTIONS! organized a citywide women’s general strike to protest working women’s double work day, unequal pay and high rates of unemployment. We demonstrated in front of a local high school where a student was harassed and threatened for being an out lesbian. When a local porn theater scheduled two weeks of films similar to snuff films (in which women of color are tortured and killed onscreen), DYKETACTIONS! protested with a constant presence, banners, poster boards and bullhorns in front of the theater door. Soon many other groups joined the protest. The mainstream press covered this amply, and in less than 48 hours the theater stopped showing the films.

We issued statements in solidarity with SEPTA (SouthEast Pennsylvania Transportation Authority) workers striking for better pay and working conditions. We worked to defend prostitutes from persecution by the State. We were engaged in struggles against prisons. We worked in coalitions to free political prisoners Assata Shakur (of the Black Liberation movement) and Susan Saxe (of the movement against the Vietnam War). As out lesbians we supported national liberation movements, including AIM (American Indian Movement) and the Puerto Rican Independence Movement, and local ones such as MOVE.

Founded in 1972, MOVE was an anarchist collective in which all the members, most of whom were African American, took the last name Africa. In 1978, 200 Philadelphia police surrounded their row house, bulldozed the entranceway, used a crane to bash in windows and hosed water into their basement in an attempt to remove them. In this fracas many MOVE members and children were wounded, one policeman died and nine MOVE members were sentenced to over 30 years in prison for third-degree murder. MOVE relocated to another street. But in 1985 the police bombed their home with C-4 and Tovex, killing the founder, John Africa, six adult members and four of their children. Surviving MOVE adults were hauled off to jail, the children were brought to welfare agencies and the MOVE home was razed to the ground.

Our struggles were so many that I cannot name them all in several pages. Yet I would like to give just a bit of detail about the relationship between DYKETACTICS! analytics and practices through two concrete examples of our local struggles that had a certain national impact: Bill 1275 and our police brutality case, and our Bicentennial protests.

DYKETACTICS! became the first lesbian group in the United States to file a federal suit against police brutality aimed solely against lesbians. The whole episode began in December 1975 when DYKETACTICS!, along with many other LGBT groups, went to a public meeting of Philadelphia City Council to demonstrate in support of Bill 1275. The bill, if passed, would have added “sexual orientation” to the existing Human Rights code, thereby protecting LGBT folks from discrimination in employment, public accommodations and housing.

By way of background I should mention that the struggle around these issues had been going on for years with no results. The evening before the bill was to be considered, I remember getting a call from our gay male ally Tommi, who urged us to attend. Kathy Fire also remembers a call to DYKETACTICS! from Women Organized Against Rape asking us to participate. The bill, if not considered by City Council the next day, would have been killed. Thus there was a certain urgency about all this. We discussed the pros and cons of a mixed LGBT action and decided we would indeed attend. We held a meeting at University of Pennsylvania’s women’s school, had a lively discussion and set about making banners that read: Dykes Ignite; Dykes Unite; Free Bill 1275, and so on.

The next day, we showed up together at City Hall with our banners. The room was packed with LGBT activists. Some of us took seats and some stood at the edges of the room holding banners. We sat and stood through a number of other bills and waited. Finally, Bill 1275 came up. Immediately, it was announced that it would be tabled once again. When we heard this, a wave of emotion swept through the room. While remaining in our seats, or standing at the sides, we raised our fists and began to chant: “Free Bill 1275.” Immediately the city’s Civil Affairs Police Unit, the riot police who had been trained by right-wing Mayor Frank Rizzo when he was Chief of Police, entered the room with force.

Though we were relatively dispersed throughout the crowd, the officers singled out DYKETACTICS! members. They were probably familiar with us, as we had a history of very public activism.

Without provocation, they came toward each of us, beat us up and dragged us out of the room. I remember seeing a number of policemen attacking Barbara, who was seated not far from me, and, as I was being punched around, managed to move toward her in an attempt to pull the officers off her. I was then dragged out of the meeting room with much ado and finally dumped in an adjacent room, where I found Barbara and others lying on the floor. Other officers had dragged others of us down City Hall's marble steps to the sidewalk.

Some DYKETACTIONS! members and allies started enacting a play inside City Hall with the help of a huge orange witch puppet. In the midst of the confusion a friend came looking for those of us who were still inside, found us, brought us out and helped all of us get to the hospital. While many of us were physically injured and rather traumatized, Barbara would develop permanent health problems as a result of the violence she endured.

When we were released from the hospital, we found that the media, which had been present at the Council meeting, had photographed and filmed some of the police brutality. We relived it all again as we saw ourselves and each other in the mainstream press and on TV. We decided to take action. We contacted lawyers, and with their help, six of us filed a federal suit against members of Civil Affairs, the City of Philadelphia and City Council Sergeants at Arms for use of excessive force and for quelling a legal demonstration.

Our trial, which lasted two weeks, took place many months later, in September 1976. It, too, was highly publicized, in mainstream newspapers, on radio and on TV. Initially we thought we had a reasonable chance to win. After all, we had visual records (photos) taken by journalists of the brutality. We had eyewitnesses who would testify, and hospital reports. And we had our own photos of our injuries taken after our release from the hospital.

In the end, none of the evidence would matter at all. From what I remember of it, there was so much queerphobia in the courtroom and in the media that we felt as though our very humanity was on trial. When the police who had attacked us took the stand, their lawyer asked them, one by one, if they were married, how many children they had fathered and what civic organizations they belonged to, in order to establish their hetero-normativity. When we took the stand, the city's lawyer asked us, the DYKETACTIONS! plaintiffs, to state whether or not we were lesbians. In 1976 that

simple question was probably the most effective way to discredit our testimony in advance. The media began fairly early on to construct us as insane.

After just a few days of the trial it became clear that the jury was reacting with sympathy for the police and with repulsion for us. We tried to turn this around at first, without success. Very soon it became obvious that we would lose the case. So we decided to use the media's presence in the courtroom to spread as much useful information about lesbians and other queers into the public domain as possible. Thus, for example, when we were asked, one by one, "Are you a lesbian?" we replied with various versions of: "Yes, I am a lesbian and so is 10 percent of the population of Philadelphia and the U.S." Through our answers on the stand and the banners we brought daily to the courthouse, we managed to make public a range of arguments for LGBTTIQ rights. Every evening, we discussed together what message we would try to put forth in the courtroom the following day.

Every day the courtroom was packed. I am not sure how many in the audience were our supporters. Activists from LGBTTIQ and other groups were definitely with us, if only because they supported Bill 1275 and opposed police brutality against lesbians. But we also came under much internal community fire. Some mainstream LGBTTIQ groups disapproved of DYKETACTICS! They did not like the fact that we refused to isolate homophobia as an issue. For us it was inseparably linked with racism, poverty, neocolonialism, capitalism and war. They did not like our dyke tactics; they wanted LGBT acceptance as normative, while we wanted to question and uproot normativity.

Some of the people of color, civil rights and national liberation groups in which we had, as individuals and as a group, been out and active, expressed unease about our hyper-public lesbianism. Some of our lesbian, as well as other queer (such as Faerie and trans) and straight political allies in non-queer movements, attended regularly. We knew they were with us all the way. The reaction of family members was mixed: Some of us had already been disowned for being lesbians, some were disowned for going through with the trial and some had family support. So, while most avoided the trial completely, some family members of two DYKETACTICS! women attended. I remember feeling that we were partially heartily supported by, and partially a source of shame to, those who mattered most to us.

After more than two weeks, the jury took just one hour to drop the charges against the police. When the verdict was pronounced, we and our supporters raised clenched fists and peacefully left the courtroom together. Outside, we six plaintiffs issued the following press release:

DYKETACTIONS!, a lesbian feminist organization, finds the city of Philadelphia and named members of the Civil Affairs Police Unit, and the Sergeants at Arms, GUILTY of oppression as charged.

The actions taken against DYKETACTIONS! were in direct violation of our civil rights as guaranteed in the Constitution of the United States. We were deprived of our right to freedom of speech, our right to assemble peacefully, our right to petition our government for redress of our grievances, our right to remain secure in our persons.

By bringing them to trial, we denounce the City of Philadelphia and the officers of the law for breaking the spirit and letter of their own laws. For a change, the oppressors instead of the oppressed appear as the defendants.

Through our presence and our testimony, we have succeeded in reintroducing to the public mind our need for a Gay Rights Bill. Gay rights legislation would prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in the areas of employment, public accommodations, and housing.

A constant difficulty we share with other oppressed peoples is gaining public recognition for the validity of our culture and politics. For example, because our organizational structure is collective (members having equal power) rather than hierarchical (members having a chain of command), our very existence as a valid entity was constantly questioned, even ridiculed in the courtroom.

By finding the defendants not guilty, the jurors in this courtroom have found DYKETACTIONS! guilty of deviating from the norm. It was our lesbianism, not police brutality, that was on trial. We intend to continue our struggle to secure our basic human rights, as women and as lesbians.

You will never have the comfort of our silence again.

Between the DYKETACTIONS! beatings (December 1975) and the trial (September 1976), we remained ever active. 1976 was of

course the year of the Bicentennial. It was officially celebrated with great enthusiasm in Philadelphia. It was also intensely protested by a number of left, liberation and civil rights groups. DYKETACTICS! participated in mass protests but also planned some of our own. Many of us wanted to organize a mass demonstration against the dominant Church and State's colluding positions against homosexuality. In August, the 41st International Eucharist Congress, a convention of Catholic nuns, priests, cardinals and bishops, would inspire about a million Catholics to make a pilgrimage to Philadelphia.

We were denied a permit to protest. By that time, because of the upcoming trial, DYKETACTICS! was well known to police officials, and it was unlikely we'd ever be granted permission for a demonstration.

To get around this little matter, we created a subgroup of DYKETACTICS!, which we called DAR, or Dykes for an Amerikan Revolution. It was our own subalternly positioned reformulation of the dominant Daughters of the American Revolution. Eventually (such impatient dykes!) we moved the date for our bicentennial action up to July 4, 1976, Independence Day itself. We decided on a threefold protest and wrote a Lesbian Feminist Declaration of 1976 for the occasion.

Our Declaration stated clearly: "We, the Dykes for an Amerikan Revolution, in order to address the mainstream of Amerikan society and begin to articulate our own lesbian-feminist vision, seize this moment of history to create herstory. . . . The Amerikan nation has been founded on the genocide of Native American peoples, financed through the slavery of African and Third World peoples and sustained through the oppression of all women. All of these atrocities have been sanctioned by men's religion."

The Declaration then went on to denounce sexism, homophobia, poverty, racism, forced sterilization of women of color, colonialism, the "global system of imperialism," war and the profits reaped by the rich, the destruction of the environment and hunting animals for sport. It also included some remarkably timely words denouncing "The Man" (those in power in the United States): "He develops a global system of imperialism which enslaves much of humanity and threatens the entire world. Under the guise of making the world 'safe for democracy,' he imposes his culture, his government and his religions on other nations. He steals their natural

and human resources to make the United States the richest land on earth." The entire Declaration was published in the summer 1976 issue of *Hera: A Philadelphia Feminist Publication* and later in *Off Our Backs* and elsewhere.

The first target in our threefold protest was Cardinal Krol, Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Very early in the morning of July 4, we loaded into vans and went to his residence. We formed a circle outside his iron-gated mansion, and one by one each of us voiced our critique of the Church's collusion with the State around homophobia and all other oppressions. When we finished we posted copies of our Declaration on the spikes of the gate and left.

We then scurried off to the second target, the First Presbyterian Church in one of Philadelphia's wealthiest suburbs. As planned, we got there just as church members were arriving. The Church had announced that its Bicentennial sermon would be about "Present Threats to Priceless Freedoms." We queers would be mentioned as one of the threats. DAR performed guerilla theater in front of a gathering crowd. The characters were The Patriarchies, The Church, The State and The Lesbians. While planning the action a week or so before, we all volunteered for roles and I ended up being The State. We all contributed to creating the costumes, the makeup and the scenarios. I remember it was a tremendous amount of fun. After our play we read out the Declaration to the stunned crowd and left.

Next we went to our third target, an outdoor celebration at St. George's Episcopal Church in yet another extremely wealthy suburb of Philadelphia. There we split into three groups, surrounded the church, and walked in unison in slow motion to a central point. At 2 p.m., when the church bells began ringing to commemorate the signing of the Declaration of Independence 200 years before, we began our theater. When finished, we managed to read our Declaration aloud to the crowd before getting swept away by security and eventually the police. No one was arrested. We thought perhaps it was because they would not risk yet another run-in with us before their/our trial.

After these actions, along with the Declaration, DAR also published an article in *Hera* to explain the logic of the targets. It declared: "The suburbs must no longer be a haven for the rich to flee the poverty they have created. The church must no longer be the dictator of human morality, working hand in hand with the State.

The DAR supports the efforts of the July 4th coalition, a coalition of various groups protesting the Bicentennial in Philadelphia, in uniting oppressed people against the state."

After the three July 4th actions we just could not resist protesting the International Eucharistic Congress in early August. Without a permit, a mass demonstration would not be possible. So we decided on three smaller actions. For the first, we placed a book table in front of the Congress's official women's event, with copies of the Declaration for distribution, but also information about nuns' participation in the 1975 International Women's Year Conference held in Mexico and a number of posters with slogans such as "Who cooked the last supper?" and "The Church Condemns Witches in the Middle Ages and Condemns Lesbians Today."

During that first action I remember going inside the women's event, where a discussion was going on, raising my hand, being handed a microphone and asking, "What about lesbians?" The microphone was pulled from my hands, even as I kept repeating into it: "What about lesbians?" Finally, an elderly white woman came to help me retain the mike and also yelled: "Yes, what about the lesbians?" At that point we were both pulled out of the room. Outside, the elderly lesbian said to me: "You're young now, and you identify as a lesbian. Let's see if that will always be so. Only time will tell." I was shocked. I thought she was on my side. I wondered whether the comment was ageist, racist or just an unfortunate result of the battle fatigue experienced by the generations before me.

For our second action, we in DAR protested the public Mass being held to pray for the military by walking through the crowds with poster boards denouncing the Church's collusion with the State in war. One poster read: "Don't Pray for the Military, Pray for Its Victims." Our third action took place at the concluding Mass, hosted by President Ford. For that one, we stood on the sidewalk with posters reading "What happened to separation of Church and State?" in reference to both Ford's presence and the Church's increasing Wall Street investments in Lockheed, Boeing and other military-related stocks. We then issued a press release detailing all the actions and the logic behind them.

As I come to a close here, I would like to open something else up: The politics of representation. I was not elected by DYKETACTIONS! to be our mouthpiece in these pages. We never held any elections. We came to full agreement, or to disagreement, through discussion. I spoke then and speak now only for myself. It

is not possible for any one person, least of all myself, to take full account of the myriad elements that constituted our collective lives, practices and political actions. It is possible, even likely, that given the heterogeneity of DYKETACTICS! and our allies, and given our intensities, each one will remember the period somewhat differently. So much happened, and so quickly. We often had divergent perspectives even then. Indeed, our differences constituted one of our many strengths. My brief personal recollections here should not be taken as the definitive word on DYKETACTICS! and our allies. We were much more than I have written. We experienced and did much more than I alone can recollect.

I would like to note a definite gap between the existence of DYKETACTICS! and other such political groups, and how the period has come to be recorded in institutionalized feminist and LGBTTIQ historiographies. In accounts about feminist and lesbian analytics and practices of the period there is no trace of the existence of DYKETACTICS! or of our main allies in Philadelphia, across the United States and elsewhere. In the mid-1970s there were many political groups of lesbians of color and racially mixed groups that took a myriad of forms. We in DYKETACTICS! were directly connected with so many. We met through common struggles, conferences, political actions and music festivals. Today it is often affirmed that lesbians of color, and issues of race, colonialism, capitalism and war, came later into feminism and LGBTTIQ politics. This erroneous notion works, unfortunately, to position some (dominant) subjects as forever in the forefront and (subaltern) others as forever in the background. It works to distort our very struggles. The fact is that we have always existed, within and prior to DYKETACTICS! We have always demanded not integration into hetero-normative, sexist, racist, class, neocolonial society, but rather its demolition and the construction of something else. The silencing of this history has definitely produced effects on subsequent generations.

As I write this, the United States is still an imperial nation at war. It has tried to bury the spirit of our most radical, vital struggles for change while supporting homo integration. I now live in a state, California, that is increasingly domesticating its queers. It recently agreed that "homosexuals" can marry, and unfortunately this seems to be quite enough for some queers. We need a wider debate about divide and rule tactics and what it means for queers

to integrate into a profoundly queerphobic, sexist, racist, class and neocolonial nation-state.

We once fought on so many fronts at once. We once united across so many differences to struggle for a more just world. I dream of a new generation of queers of all sizes, shapes, colors, ages and sexual, racialized, class and geopolitical positionalities, who will understand the struggle for queer liberation as inseparable from the struggle against sexism, racism, class oppression, colonialism, war and the destruction of the environment.

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The Gay Community in Crisis

Don Kilhefner

Community is first of all a quality of the heart. It grows from the spiritual knowledge that we are alive not for ourselves but for one another. Community is the fruit of our capacity to make the interests of others more important than our own. The question, therefore, is not “How can we make community?” but “How can we develop and nurture giving hearts?”
—Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*

In October 1979, after I had returned from the first “Spiritual Gathering for Radical Faeries,” which Harry Hay and I had organized in the beautiful Sonora desert of Southern Arizona east of Tucson, I was contacted by Christopher St. West, the organization that sponsors Los Angeles’s Gay Pride Parade and Carnival every June, to write an article for the slick, glossy program it prints each year. After spending a week in the desert with nearly 200 Radical Faeries from all over North America, I was on fire with gay spirit—flames shooting out the tips of my fingers and every orifice of my body. Of course, I would gladly write an article for Gay Pride on what I thought was the most important issue facing us as gay people at the time—*gay assimilation vs. gay enspiritment*. Thirty years later, it still is. You cannot have both at the same time. It’s an impossibility. It’s either one or the other. Just as today we cannot have American democracy and American imperialism at the same time. It’s an impossibility.

The *Crossroads* article 30 years ago was based largely on workshops I had been doing with gay men since 1975 at the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center in Los Angeles (now the Gay and Lesbian Center—“Community” and “Services” having been erased from its name by assimilationists in the early 1990s) named Gay Voices and Visions: The Enspiritment of Gay Politics/The Politics of Gay Enspiritment. I had gathered together all the gay visionary literature I could get my faggoty hands on, beginning with Walt

Whitman and including Edward Carpenter, Gerald Heard (writing under the pseudonym D. B. Vest in homophile publications), Harry Hay et al.; culled the evolutionary biology and sociobiology literature about us at the time; and also rounded up the other usual suspects. Between 1975 and 1979—week after week, workshop after workshop—gay men read this literature together in Los Angeles. And the literature soon began reading them. Like a white dove coming from the invisible world, pecking on their hearts, cooing in their ears, asking them to remember—something was brought alive in them. They experienced that gay consciousness was real. It was intellectually and spiritually exciting, and a new type of gay consciousness-raising group was being birthed.

Shortly after submitting the article in late 1979 I received a phone call from Christopher St. West (CSW) telling me that they had decided not to print the article. CSW was angry with me. They felt the article was fantasy on my part and gay people simply would not be able to understand what I was saying. The sad irony of this, of course, was that I had played a central role in organizing the first two Gay Pride marches in Los Angeles in 1970 and 1971. It was felt, however, that the article really did not have much to do with celebrating Gay Pride and really was not about gay people and the gay community—and, if it was, it was much too radical to print.

By 1979 largely middle-class gay assimilationists were beginning to take over the community that had been created by the radical gay liberation movement during the past decade, and often they were embarrassed by their radical roots. By then, Gay Pride marches had become *parades*; *gay demonstrations* against oppression were becoming *carnivals*; a *marketplace of ideas* was turning into a *marketing niche*. Increasingly, with startling speed, gay men could not remember anymore. It was as if Tinker Bell had flown over the United States sprinkling fairy dust and saying that gay people should not think or remember who they are and from where they came. Increasingly, there was little awareness by the organizers of or the attendees at these Pride events that they were paying respect to those who had gone before them and honoring a social and political revolution of major global proportions that had been fought on their behalf. (Recently, on returning to me a copy of the first documentary ever done on the Gay Liberation movement in 1970—Ken Robinson's *Some Of Your Best Friends*—a young gay man angrily said to me: "Why hasn't anyone ever told me about this history! This is something I can be proud of!") Gay Pride events

became just another party with marketing opportunities. It was not too long thereafter that some Radical Faeries, alas, I am sad to say, minus the word *radical*, turned into *common fairies*—lots of glitter, little substance. In my last conversation with Harry Hay before he died, he deeply lamented the deteriorating state of affairs. Gay assimilationist triviality was raising its shallow head.

Shortly thereafter my friend Mark Thompson asked if he could use the *Crossroads* article and the readings I had assembled for the Gay Voices and Visions workshops for a book he was beginning to edit, which became *Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning* (White Crane), an important and groundbreaking statement about enspiritment by gay men.

Since 1979 the pace of gay assimilation has picked up tremendous speed and with the advent of the extreme right-wing Reagan Revolution it has become the dominant political and social ideology of the gay community. Community building, grassroots activism and the exploration of gay identity became dirty words; now individual financial achievement, checkbook activism and gay *bourgeois* conformity reigns. I draw your attention to an important article by nationally syndicated columnist Gregory Rodriguez on the op-ed page of the *Los Angeles Times* titled “Gay—the new straight” (November 5, 2007) and my op-ed response to Rodriguez in the *Times* (December 5, 2007). Let me hasten to add that I have no interest in demonizing gay assimilationists per se. I am interested, however, in commenting on the phenomenology of gay assimilation and how it is impacting our community—extremely negatively, I suggest.

Hey! What’s Happening?

What has been the price we have had to pay for mindlessly allowing, and maybe even participating in, gay assimilation? **One price is that very little is happening in the gay community today except for endless parties and fundraisers.** Assimilationists will say we are basically just like heterosexuals except for our choice of sex partners. (Harry would say to me: “We’re just like hets when it comes to sex, and in most other ways we are different.”) Assimilationists act as if we already have an identity (homosexual), and with cybersex and hookups who needs a community or even an intellectual life? A gay leader in Los Angeles recently thought that Chief Joseph was a Supreme Court judge. Evolutionary biologists inform us that the basic function of heterosexuals is the reproduc-

tive survival of our species. The most essential question for us at present is: *What is the evolutionary function of gay people? What are gay people for?* To mimic heterosexuals? I don't think so. Otherwise, evolutionarily speaking, we would have gone down the drainpipe of history long ago.

Inherent in gay assimilation theory and practice is the disappearance of the gay community and gay identity, and it is happening all across the country. In a front-page article in the *New York Times* (September 30, 2007) titled "Gay Enclaves Face Prospect of Being Passé," the reporter writes about "a waning sense of belonging that is also being felt in gay enclaves across the nation, from Key West, Fla., to West Hollywood, as they struggle to maintain cultural relevance in the face of gentrification." The *Times* says you are no longer a community but an "enclave." They get it wrong when they say the problem is "gentrification." The problem is gay assimilation.

It saddens me tremendously today when energized young gay men want to know where they can go to become actively and constructively involved in the community. For the first time since the 1980s I have no place toward which to point them. It tears me apart when intelligent young gay men tell me they have to "dumb it down" to be part of the gay community. I have a hunch this is true in your community as well.

Now You See It, Now You Don't

Another price we are paying for gay assimilation is that we are becoming invisible again. Please, hold off on the *Will and Grace* argument. *Will and Grace* had about as much relationship to gay people's lives as Liberace had to do with heterosexuality. (To his everlasting glory, he won a libel case in England when a journalist accused him of being a "homosexual"—now that's *real* chutzpah.) Gay artist and filmmaker Bruce LaBruce, observing what's happening with our portrayal in the media, recently fumed about contemporary assimilationists "who seem to have no problem being represented in such Stepin Fetchit shows as *Will and Grace* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* as bourgeois, shallow, materialistic and vain, obsessed with appearance and conspicuous consumption" (*And the Bland Played On*, Nerve.com). We have become entertainment for the dominant corporate/entertainment/consumer culture. With

the exception of the assimilationists' same-sex marriage agenda, we are not making hard news in any significant ways.

In the all-night dialogues I used to have with Harry Hay when we lived together during the early Radical Faery years (he would stay up all night reading, listening to music or writing; would go to bed when the sun came up and sleep until the midafternoon), he often reminded me that political winds can change very quickly, and what was bestowed on a minority group one year with media access and media portrayals can be taken away quickly the next by the dominant culture. History is replete with examples. Weimar Jews, of course, immediately come to mind.

Let me give you a current example of increased *gay invisibility* in Los Angeles. News of the gay community here has virtually disappeared from the pages of the *Los Angeles Times* with the exception a few and far between same-sex marriage updates when they cannot be avoided. I also read the *New York Times*, and it appears the same is true for the East Coast. The recent California ruling giving constitutional "equal protection" status to gay marriages naturally increased media attention briefly but died off quickly.

I arranged a lunch recently with a city editor of the *Los Angeles Times* to ask why we had become invisible again—I was curious. In 1970 I played an important role in the Los Angeles Gay Liberation Front's project to take over sparsely populated Alpine County in Northern California and establish the first openly gay government in history there. Then governor Ronald Reagan called a news conference threatening to call out the California National Guard to stop us, and the *Los Angeles Times*, *Time Magazine*, *NBC Nightly News*, etc. were forced to cover Gay Liberation as a political movement—which was our intention—instead of treating us as a medical issue and sending its medical reporter to our news conferences like the *Los Angeles Times* had before. When I asked the *Times* city editor why we were invisible again, he replied that he simply did not *need* to cover the gay community anymore, and in any case he felt nothing newsworthy seemed to be happening there, just endless social events of one type or another—nothing of substance.

Hey Brother, Can You Spare Ten Thousand Bucks?

Another place we pay a high price for gay assimilation is the weakening of our gay political power and integrity as a community.

Let me ask you a question: Could you imagine the Jewish community (or any other politically and socially aware minority group for that matter) holding a special dinner honoring and praising President Bill Clinton after he had issued a presidential order stating that no Jews can reveal they are Jews and they must act as if they are gentiles in the U.S. military? If their Jewishness is uncovered, they will be discharged (12,000 gay men and women so far). And, furthermore, only gentiles can be married as dictated by the Defense of Marriage Act, for which Clinton actively lobbied and which he signed into law? Do you think Jews would honor Clinton? I don't think so. They would have protested this injustice loudly, vehemently and intelligently. But the gay assimilationists threw a "thank you" dinner for Clinton. They are so hungry for political acceptance by heterosexuals—rather than self-acceptance—they will sell their souls to the highest bidder. And that is exactly what the gay assimilationist political clique has become—the cash cow of two political parties, neither one of which really wants us otherwise. Gay Republicans still need to use the back door of the GOP when their bagmen deliver the loot. Ask McCain and Obama about their positions on same-sex marriage. McCain says "no!" with the loudspeaker turned to high volume. Obama sounds like a theologian, not a constitutional law professor, with his nuanced and convoluted elocution. Are their positions any different from Clinton's 15 years ago?

Coors Whore Award—Who's Next?

We pay a high price for gay assimilation with the eroding of the grassroots support for and the integrity of our community institutions. Here in Los Angeles not too long ago, right-of-center assimilationists clandestinely got the West Hollywood City Council to honor the Coors Brewing Co. for its hiring policies regarding gay people (as a marketing ploy on Coors's behalf). Coors then gave \$15,000, chump change, to Outfest: The Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in Los Angeles, trumpeting the City Council resolution and plastering West Hollywood with banners crowing that Outfest was sponsored by Coors (trying to give the impression the Coors's Boycott—the most successful in gay history—was over, which it was not). The Coors Boycott Committee raised holy hell. It is a well-documented fact that stocks and profits from the Coors Brewing Co., a family-owned business, are being funneled into Coors's

Castle Rock Foundation, which funds extreme right-wing homophobic organizations. These organizations constitute the gay-hate coalition in this country, and they are out to destroy every advance gay people have made since 1969.

The Gay Tavern Guild here responded by restating its support for the boycott—since 1978 not a single gay bar in Los Angeles sells Coors. After exhaustive research and public hearings on the subject (plus two debates between Coors employee Mary Cheney and me before the Stonewall Democratic Club and the ACLU) both the Stonewall Democratic Club and the City Council of West Hollywood endorsed the Coors Boycott, asking gay people not to feed the hand that bites them. After Morris Kight and I provided Outfest with the facts of the matter, its leadership agreed not to accept Coors's money in the future. In every case, when gay people have the full story on Coors funding, not just the Coors public relations/marketing spin, they endorse the Coors Boycott. Yet even today gay community newspapers carry very lucrative, sophisticated, full-page color ads for the Coors Brewing Co., and the Gay and Lesbian Association Against Defamation (GLAAD), of all organizations, for Christ's sake, not so long ago accepted money from Coors as one of the sponsors of its banquet in New York City. Hello, GLAAD. Hello, New York City. The lights are on. Is anyone at home? Is anyone tending the store?

Several years ago the Coors Boycott Committee met with the GLAAD Board of Directors to discuss the problem. As *Hashem* is my witness, their gay assimilationist Board just did not get that GLAAD should not accept money from one of the primary oppressors of gay people and did all kinds of transparent intellectual acrobatics to justify taking Coors's money. I was stunned. It was like talking to fourth graders caught with their hands in the cookie jar. They refused to even discuss the antigay funding of Coors's Castle Rock Foundation. To them, all money was good money. GLAAD was being coached by the Wittek and Combs public relations firm, run by two assimilationist gay men in Washington, D.C., who were on the Coors payroll at the time. At the end of the discussion, seeing that GLAAD would not return Coors's money, I presented its president with the "Coors Whore Award"—a beautiful full-color, poster-size framed drawing showing a golden cockroach with a bottle of Coors in one hand and with his dick in the other hand pissing on a rainbow flag. GLAAD is not the exception; it is the rule among major gay organizations. **Gay assimilation is having a corrupting and**

corroding effect on the integrity and accountability to gay people by our major community organizations.

In his Pali discourses, Gautama Buddha taught that there are times when anger is in the *dharma*—exactly what the situation naturally calls for (like the uprising led by Buddhist monks in Myanmar recently). Moses, Jesus and Mohammed spoke and acted likewise. What has happened to gay men? Why are they not angry with what is happening to them and their community? Why are gay men silent? As Martin Luther King Jr. warned us: “Our lives begin to end the day we become ‘silent’ about things that matter” (*Eternal Vigilance*, 1967).

Take It to the Center of the City

I was communicating with Toby Johnson recently, sharing with him that there is a line in *The Odyssey* that has always caught my attention. *The Odyssey* is the great archetypal story in Western literature about the father-son mysteries of the soul. At its beginning, Telemachus was lamenting not having a father. His father, Odysseus, departed when he was a baby to fight the Trojan War and had been gone 20 years. On his departure Odysseus, however, had placed Telemachus under the tutelage of Mentor, through whom Athena speaks. Mentor was consoling Telemachus and telling him that in his father hunger lamentations he was finding his voice as a man. And then Mentor/Athena says to him: **“And when you have found your voice you must take it into the center of the city.”** I respectfully suggest, beloved brothers, that is the task that is staring us in the face right now vis-à-vis gay assimilation. For all of you who have been laboring in the vineyards of gay spirit and gay consciousness at the edge of the village—it is now time to take your voice to the center of the city. You have been slowly finding your voice, sometimes in terrible isolation and lack of brotherly succor. I hear the voice you have found in the books, articles, poems, Web sites and blogs you are writing and the gatherings you have been organizing at the edge of the city. And the center of our gay cities and villages are hungry for the food of gay spirit and consciousness after decades of gay assimilationist pretentiousness, self-alienation and empty calories. **“And when you have found your voice you must take it to the center of the city.”** The edge of the village must stop talking *only* to the edge of the village. The edge of the village, where so many dimensions of gay soul are gestated and midwived,

must take its newly found voice to the center of the city. Gay soul making and the communal and political evolution of our people demands it.

There is a critical need to create a *new frontier of gay consciousness* as we move past the present wreckage of the gay assimilationists (remembering always that they are also our brothers and we must truly be our brother's keeper). A frontier is a growing or expanding edge. Individuals, if they are psychospiritually and psychophysically alive, will have a growing edge. And communities and nations also have a growing edge. It is where the new, the challenging, the disturbing, the dangerous, the impossible is being constellated. It is the place where our lives, often unwillingly, move forward into the great unknown. The frontier is the most exciting and frightening place to be.

And as my fingers press the last keys of this commentary, the last notes of a J. S. Bach cantata are playing synchronistically on Los Angeles's KUSC. It's name: "I go and seek with longing."

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