Resist Newsletter, May-June 1995

Resist

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/resistnewsletter

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/resistnewsletter/274
Ask.  
Tell.

LARRY GOLDSMITH

Question 11) What is the makeup/diversity of your group in terms of age, race, sexual preference, class, gender? Have you taken steps to increase the diversity?

Many of the groups that apply for funding from RESIST have given some attention to the concerns behind this question, which appears on our grant application. They, like RESIST, envision an inclusive movement, one that thrives on building coalitions, and one that breaks down the cultural and economic boundaries that have so often divided us. Most have a good sense of their membership; there is rarely any difficulty providing a rough estimate of the organizational breakdown by race, sex, and age. It is usually possible as well to offer a fair description of the class composition of an organization or project committee: it might be predominantly middle-class, or primarily working-class, or some combination of the two.


There is, however, one category in this straightforward request for information that causes difficulty for some applicants, and that is sexual preference. Some groups profess not to know, or else not to care, or they tell us they would not presume to ask, or that they think it inappropriate to pry—but they usually assure us, in any case, that they do not discriminate. Consider the following examples: One group notes that "ages range from 20 to 50. Racial characteristics are predominantly Caucasian, though among these seven are Brazilian and one is Puerto Rican. One of our core members is Afro-American. Another is commonly perceived in the U.S. as indigenous, although in Brazil she would merely be considered 'mulatta.'" Along with this detailed description of racial composition, they also state that the group is 60 percent women, and, by way of addressing class and income-level, they provide a list of members' occupations.

This same group, however, that can describe so precisely the race, sex, and occupational profile of its membership, also notes that they "have no information on the sexual orientation of our members and regard it as inappropriate to solicit such information." There is, of course, a legitimate concern here. Much as we might look forward to the day when all lesbians and gay men can be perfectly open about their sexual preference, the reality is that many people still stand to lose their jobs, their housing, and their children for lack of legal protections against homophobic discrimination. For this reason, the right to privacy has long been an important concern on the lesbian and gay political agenda. We don't want government, employers, or landlords investigating our sexuality, or keeping records of who we are.

Neither (goes this reasoning, if you push it just a bit further) do we want the political organizations we join investigating, keeping tabs, or reporting on us.
"Probably at least 10% of our members are gay, lesbian or bisexual, though we have not overtly discussed it and...there is no hard data," writes another, this one working on environmental issues.

But surely in the course of doing their political work, the members of these groups get to know one another—enough to learn something about each other's lives, their spouses, relationships, families, friends, and other political work. (For that matter, it is even rather likely that they met their spouses, lovers, and friends through their political work.) Another applicant, a group which works on alcohol, drug, and AIDS education, does claim some openness, noting that "one member...is open about her sexual orientation." Only one? Their heterosexual members have no need to maintain the "privacy" of their families and friends; no doubt they are, all of them, open about their sexual preference.

There's still no shortage of homophobia out there in the real world. The current backlash against sexual preference non-discrimination legislation only underscores the unfortunate fact that the right to privacy remains a practical matter of survival for many lesbians and gay men, if only as a last defense. But if those on the Left do not work toward creating more openness within their own organizations, how will this issue ever be accomplished in the society at large? We need to work toward building our organizations into places where no one has the need for this type of privacy—where the sexuality of lesbian and gay members need not be hidden behind those closet doors we have fought so hard to open up.

Larry Goldsmith is a former reporter for Gay Community News and a member of the RESIST Board. He teaches history at Hiram College in Ohio.
What’s Biology Got to Do with It?

The Patriarchal Rights of Fatherhood v. Lesbian and Gay Families

NANCY D. POLIKOFF

For over twenty years, gay men and lesbians have openly contended that we make good parents—of our own children, of foster children, of adopted children. And for over twenty years the legal response has been mixed and unpredictable. A New Hampshire statute bars gay men and lesbians from adopting; an Ohio appeals court refuses to block a gay man’s adoption of a seven-year-old boy. Massachusetts revises its foster care regulations to permit lesbian and gay foster parents; Nebraska institutes a total ban. A District of Columbia statute prohibits discrimination in custody and visitation on the basis of sexual orientation; across the river in Virginia, a judge places a three-year-old boy with his grandmother, finding his mother’s lesbian relationship illegal and immoral. And so it goes.

Meanwhile, our community faces equally intense internal disputes about childrearing. Although these disputes are less obviously about whether lesbians and gay men make good parents, they are fundamentally about the definition of family—about whether the heterosexual model grounded primarily in biological connection can trump the families we create that challenge the heterosexual, biological norm. Although no one argues in these disputes that lesbians and gay men should not raise children, in visitation suits among gays and lesbians inevitably one side invokes rigid definitions of parenthood derived from that heterosexual, biological norm to challenge the authenticity of lesbian and gay families.

For example, a rash of appellate court decisions in the early 1990s upheld an unyielding position that a child can have only one mother. Thus lesbian couples who had planned for and raised their children jointly were not seen as genuine two-parent families. The mother who gave birth to or legally adopted the child was the only mother a court would recognize, regardless of the viewpoint of the child or the conduct of the couple over many years. In California, a judge ignored the pleas of an eight-year-old girl who had lived exclusively with her nonbiological mother for the four years following the couple’s separation and required the child to move to the home of her biological mother. In New York, a woman was denied even visitation with a boy who shared her name, who called her Mommy, and whom she had jointly raised and supported for several years.

In these cases, the biological mothers have triumphed by simply asserting the right to change their minds, and courts have agreed with them. More surprising, perhaps, some lesbians and gay men have agreed with them, usually out of personal loyalty or a conviction that the biological mother had a good reason to want the nonbiological mother out of the child’s life. These supporters are usually unaware that what the biological mother is saying in court is not that her former partner is a bad mother but that she is not a mother at all, that she is no different from a babysitter or a neighbor.

Just as courts are unwilling to recognize that a child can have two mothers, they are also unwilling to recognize that a child can have no father. Thus lesbians choosing known semen donors to conceive children have found themselves at the mercy of those donors. Donors seeking parental rights have been mostly successful, and their success has been continued on page four.
grounded in legal rules that elevate biology over function and in cultural norms that regard fathers as essential to children.

Steel v. Young

The most notorious dispute in recent years over parenthood within our families involved the claim of Thomas Steel, a gay San Francisco attorney living with HIV, that he was entitled to an order of paternity concerning Ry Russo-Young, now 13 years old. Ry had lived her entire life with her two lesbian mothers, Robin Young, her biological mother, and Sandra Russo, her nonbiological mother, and her older sister, Cade—who is Russo's biological daughter. Although Steel garnered support within the lesbian and gay community by delineating his entitlement to a paternity order as grounded in an expansive, non-nuclear definition of family, his success in court rested upon an overvaluing of biology and fatherhood and an acceptance of the argument, explicitly asserted by Steel, that Young and Russo and their children could not constitute a legitimate family because their family unit contained no father.

Although the facts in the case known as Steel v. Young were hotly contested, the basic parameters of the case were not in dispute. In the late 1970s, Young and Russo decided they wanted to raise children and that each would bear one child. They wanted their children to have information about and some access to their biological fathers, and therefore they selected known semen donors. Both Jack Kolb, Cade's donor, and Tom Steel, Ry's donor, agreed that they would donate semen without thereby obtaining the rights and responsibilities of parenthood. Both agreed that, when the mothers determined it was appropriate, they would meet the children.

When Cade was five she began asking about her origins. Ry was three. The family lived in New York and both donors lived in San Francisco, and Russo and Young made arrangements to travel to San Francisco with the children to introduce them to both men. After this initial visit, a warm relationship developed between Steel and the Russo-Young family. There were several visits between Steel and the family over the next six years. These visits took place at the family's home in New York, at vacation homes, and in San Francisco.

Steel portrayed the contact that developed as an independent, father-daughter relationship between himself and Ry. The mothers portrayed the relationship as one between Steel and the entire family in which Steel was no more important to Ry than were other close family friends. Steel's most significant evidence included times Ry had referred to him as "Dad", verbally and in correspondence, including a father's day card; descriptions of times he spent with Ry in which Ry was obviously happy to see him; and gifts he had sent Ry, including money he had sent to the family which he characterized as a form of support.

The mothers' most significant evidence established that Steel had never spent a night with Ry in which the mothers were not also present; that the number of days he claimed to have spent with Ry were misleading both because the time was spent with the family, not just Ry, and because either Steel was at work or Ry was in school during many of the days; that Steel had never made decisions concerning Ry's life or provided any daily care or financial support for her; that Ry had sent an identical father's day card to Jack Kolb; and that whatever relationship Steel had with the children he had with Ry and Cade together.

When Ry was nine, Steel decided that he wanted visitation with Ry outside of her mothers' presence. He wanted to introduce Ry to his parents and his grandmother, who up until that time had not known of her existence. He was not comfortable including the mothers in these introductions. He asked the mothers to send both girls to California during the summer of 1991. When the mothers refused, he asked them to go to mediation. They refused, telling Steel that they would not mediate about their daughter and that he was changing the terms of their agreement. They asked him to come to New York to talk further and to continue visiting with Ry and the entire family on the same terms as before. Instead, Steel filed a paternity action in New York Family Court in August, 1991, seeking immediate visitation with Ry in California, a request that the court denied. Once Steel commenced the litigation, Young and Russo ceased all social contact between Steel and their family.

The trial judge appointed an attorney for Ry, who vigorously opposed Steel's paternity and visitation claim, as did the psychiatrist who met extensively with Steel and his partner, Young, Russo, Ry, and Cade. After a 26 day trial, the judge denied Steel's petition. The judge ruled that Ry never considered Steel a third parent, that in her family there had been no father. He stated that an order of paternity would send a message that Steel, Young, and Ry constituted one family and Russo, Kolb, and Cadeconstituted another, and that this juxtaposition of relationships was frightening to Ry. He found that Steel had supported the creation of a two-mother family structure for Ry and that his biological connection to Ry did not accord him the right to change the rules of Ry's life when to do so would be counter to Ry's best interests. The trial court's decision was a stunning validation of Ry's relationships with Russo as Ry's mother and Cade as her sister, even though as a rigid legal matter both were strangers to her.

Steel's supporters decried the trial judge's decision. Some claimed it resulted from bias based on his sexual orientation or his HIV status. Others claimed it
represented victory for a relationship mimicking heterosexual marriage rather than for an alternative family structure of three parents.

Winning by the tried and true

When the New York appeals court, in a 3-2 decision, reversed the trial judge last November, Steel's supporters were elated. Absent from their elation was any comprehension that Steel's victory was grounded not in respect for alternative gay and lesbian family structure but in the most rigid and patriarchal notion of family. In alternative family structures, biology is not determinative of the nature of the relationships. In a rigidly defined patriarchal family, a man's biological connection confers rights. Those are the rights Steel garnered.

Many of us have constructed for our children a wide circle of adults who help care for them. My twelve year-old daughter has had a relationship since birth with my friend Joanne, who has spent up to two weeks at a time alone with her during which she has done the daily work of parenting; who has taken her to her parents' home; who sends her presents for Hannukah (eight of them), for her birthday and for the A's on her report card. Joanne, who lives in California, has spent far more time with my daughter and had far more responsibility for her than Steel ever had for Ry.

If I decided not to send my daughter to Joanne this year for her summer visit, I doubt anyone, her friends or I, would believe she should be able to go to court for an order of visitation. They might think I was making the wrong decision; they might think I was under-valuing the importance of my daughter's relationship with Joanne; they might try to get me to change my mind. But the notion that Joanne would have a legally enforceable right to a week at the beach in Santa Cruz with my daughter, and that she would have this right even if my daughter didn't want to go, is absurd.

Steel's supporters have always argued that he sought only visitation, not custody, as a way of suggesting that what he wanted wasn't very much, as a way of presenting the mothers as unreasonable. This argument is disingenuous. He sought visitation as a right of parenthood deriving from his biological connection to Ry, an argument, for example, that Joanne could never make concerning my daughter. He did not seek an order requiring visitation with Cade, even though he had consistently treated the girls as sisters in keeping with his agreement with Russo and Young. To seek visitation with Cade would have required Steel to expose himself to the vulnerability of arguing about rights in new, alternatively constructed families. By litigating concerning Ry alone he was able to stick to the tried and true successful arguments that have nothing to do with new lesbian and gay families and everything to do with the patriarchal rights of fatherhood.

Steel may say that his victory was a triumph for expansive definitions of parenthood, and his supporters may believe that. But neither the legal arguments Steel presented to the court nor the court decision itself can be read that way. Steel repeatedly treated Russo as a non-parent. He argued that she was not legally obligated to support Ry and that his own wealth should be a ground upon which to grant his paternity petition; he excluded Russo from the courtroom during the entire trial, a power he had only because she was technically not Ry's legal mother. Unlike the trial judge's opinion, which split up and Young subsequently become involved with Russo. This attempted rewriting of the history of this family, which the appeals court completely accepted, obliterated the reality of life in planned lesbian families and specifically obliterated the reality of Ry's life.

Steel invoked the rights of divorced fathers as a means of arguing that he lost in the trial court because of his sexual orientation. He didn't. He lost in the trial court because the judge accepted the possibility that a child could be raised to know the biological facts of her origin, and have a warm relationship with her biological progenitor, but still consider him something other than a parent. Steel's sexual orientation was irrelevant. If men who father children are sometimes able to gain full parental rights when they have had as little to do with their children as Steel had to do with Ry, that should be an invitation to challenge how little society expects fathers to do before it accords them the rights of parenthood.

The appeals court opinion contains the gratuitous statement that "the notion that a lesbian mother should enjoy a parental relationship with her daughter but a gay father should not is so innately discriminatory as to be unworthy of comment." As no one had argued, and the trial court had not held, that Steel's peti-

The appeals court twisted Ry's family structure from something it refused to acknowledge — two mothers and two children — to something it presupposed — a mother, a father and a child.

fully recognized Russo as a second mother, the appeals court decision barely mentions her; it repeatedly characterizes decisions made by Young and Russo concerning their family as Young's alone; it most frequently refers to Russo as Young's partner rather than Ry's mother.

Steel asked for and obtained from the appeals court an analogy between his situation and that of a divorced father. He wanted the court to see the configuration of people as identical to that which would be found had he been married to Young when Ry was born and had they then

tion should be denied because he was gay, this statement responded to nothing that was at issue in the case. Rather, it betrays how far the appeals court was willing to go to contort this family into a traditional patriarchal model. The statement both ignores Russo as Ry's second mother and equates the parental status of Young and Steel as though they stood on equal footing with each other. Thus the appeals court twisted Ry's family structure from something it refused to acknowledge — two mothers and two children — to

continued on page six
something it presupposed — a mother, a father, and a child.

The premise of Ry's life was the lack of correlation between biology and family. With no biological connection to either Russo or Cade, she unquestionably considered them her mother and her sister. She knew her biological connection to Steel, and she had a warm and loving relationship with him, on a limited and circumscribed basis, over a number of years. It is a tribute to how successful Russo and Young were in creating a new family model not based on biology that Ry did not equate knowledge of her biological connection to Steel with parenthood. The appeals court could not fathom this distinction, and Steel's supporters within our community seem unable to do so either.

"Legitimacy" and the invalidation of our families

Steel succeeded in the appeals court on one other basis. A series of New York cases, through application of a legal doctrine called estoppel, had prevented a biological father from obtaining a paternity order when the child's mother was married to another man whom the child considered her father. The trump over the rights conferred by biology was the child's existing image of her family, often expressed as the legitimacy of the child as a product of a marriage. As the attorney for several lesbian and gay organizations that supported the position of the mothers and of Ry in this case, I argued that Ry should be considered the legitimate child of Russo and Young. If the court interprets the legal doctrine as protecting a child from a perceived outsider when the family is married and heterosexual but allows intrusion based on biology into planned lesbian families, then the very basis of our families is invalidated.

Steel, on the other hand, explicitly argued that the purpose of estoppel is preservation of a child's legitimacy, defined narrowly as a child's status as the offspring of a married mother and father. He argued that estoppel is limited to those situations where a determination of paternity based upon biology would render a child "illegitimate." He argued, and the majority of the appeals court accepted, that the doctrine was inapplicable to Ry because nothing could render her "legitimate." He repeatedly invoked the notion that he should win because Ry had no father, an argument that plays into the most reprehensible social and political analyses that blame woman-headed households for society's worst ills.

Steel has invoked a certain amount of sympathy because of his HIV status. This is understandable. Although Steel's supporters have tried to use his HIV status to garner support, the mothers never argued, and the trial court never held, that he should be denied an order of paternity because he was HIV positive. Although it is hard to maintain that Ry will be able to develop whatever relationship she wants with him when she is an adult when he may not live that long, Steel's predication is of his own making. He had a relationship with Ry that would have continued had he not filed his lawsuit. She was nine when he wanted her to fly across the country without her mothers to visit him. She is now 13. Had he not invoked patriarchal legal rules to establish his "right" to visitation with Ry regardless of her wishes or the wishes of her mothers, he might now be enjoying the very relationship he once wanted.

After the appeals court ruled in Steel's favor, the mothers appealed to New York's highest court. That court both agreed to review the appeals court decision and granted a stay of the appeals court order, thus preventing Steel from obtaining any visitation until the legal issues in the case were finally settled. Although an oral argument date was set in September and final resolution of the case was therefore probably less than a year away, last month Steel withdrew his paternity petition, thereby dropping all of his claims.

It is a bizarre and anticlimactic ending. For the Russo-Young family it is surely a relief. But for other lesbian families, especially in New York, it leaves intact the appeals court decision vesting known donors with full rights of parenthood.

The decision leaves lesbian families with few choices. Although Steel, Young, and Russo had no written agreement, both the majority and dissent in the appeals court agreed that any such agreement would have been unenforceable. One state appeals court, in Oregon, has upheld an agreement between a semen donor and a lesbian couple waiving in the donor the rights and responsibilities of parenthood, but in most states, and certainly in New York, such agreements do nothing other than prove the intent of the parties at the time of conception.

In a handful of states, donor insemination statutes provide some way (usually by using a physician) of ensuring that a semen donor will have no parental rights. In the absence of such a statute, however, selecting a known donor is a high risk proposition, one that leaves the children in lesbian families vulnerable to a court-imposed definition of parenthood. That definition will almost always say that biology trumps all and that a child must always have a father and may never have more than one mother.

Nancy D. Polikoff is a Professor of Law at American University Law School. She has been litigating and writing about legal issues involving lesbian and gay families for 20 years.

This article is reprinted from a longer version in Gay Community News, spring 1995. See subscription information under the grants listing for Gay Community News on the back page.
How Do We Look?

Representing queerness, race and class in the nineties

KATE GYLLENSVARD

A cartoon by Jennifer Camper entitled “Visibility” appears in the latest issue of *Gay Community News*. It depicts a lesbian at work listening to talk radio, on public transit glancing at the headlines, at home turning on the TV news. Each media source expresses the current obsession with observing, cataloguing, explaining, vilifying, and making a spectacle of lesbians, gays and other queers. As the cartoon lesbian says “Finally, the love that dared not speak its name is being spoken...but it’s being spoken by all the wrong people!”

One of the many ironies of the late 20th century is that queerness is being made more visible precisely by those forces that want to erase it. At the same time, what is being stamped out and/or appropriated are the spaces for and forms of representation created by gays and lesbians. But although groups like ACT-UP and Queer Nation have burnt out or grown quiet (for the time being), and several gay and lesbian journals have folded, there are still progressive publications offering a forum for our own conversations about visibility and political organizing in the nineties. I want to comment on three of these resources: *Radical America’s “Becoming a Spectacle”* published in 1993 in two parts (v.24, no.4 and v.25, no.1); *Radical Teacher’s “Lesbian/Gay/Queer Studies”* issue (no.45, winter 1994); and the winter 1995 issue of *Gay Community News (GCN)* (v.20, no.4).

All the articles seem in one way or another to be grappling with the desire for, and debates about queer representation in two interconnected senses—the political, and descriptive or image-producing. As we know too well, remaining invisible and unrepresented in both senses can leave us isolated, vulnerable, and unrecognized. But demanding visibility means demanding representation within and by already existing, powerful institutions like the media and mainstream politics. Entering into the cultural fields of vision—even as we try to expand them—creates tremendous contests over who controls the image-making both within the society at large and within the lesbian/gay/queer community. In some ways asserting a visible presence is akin to creating a target, an image seen through a refracting lens. As the cartoon mentioned above illustrates, our visibilities can be appropriated and distorted into a spectacle of titillating ridicule or of sexually diseased, terror-inciting monsters.

Who is (re)presentable?

How much can queers resist and even transform the language and structures of mainstream institutions to make space for our own self-representations? How complicit do we have to be with institutional stereotypes, hierarchies and frameworks in order to be seen? In other words, how much do we have to make ourselves “normal” or white or middle class or not really very gay—or even “flamboyant” in a predetermined way—to have a presence deemed recognizable, (re)presentable by those institutions? And how do we replicate images that stereotype and exclude within the gay/lesbian/queer community, and especially within the strategies and goals of our political work against discrimination?

In exploring the possibilities for representation, articles in *Radical Teacher* scan the historical landscape for both gay teachers and queer studies. Robert Martin’s “Scandal at Smith” argues that the McCarthyite state and press of the paranoid 1950s read homosexuality as both obscene — collapsing it with pornography — and as treason. The state was able to destroy people like Newton Arvin, an English professor at Smith, for looking at homosexual “pornographic” images with his friends, and for being an academic leftist. Martin suggests that Arvin was also destroyed because he believed that as a white middle-class respectable professor he had enough legitimacy to evade prosecution. Yet, the homosexual community of the 1950s understood itself as closeted — isolated and silent. This meant that Arvin’s...
friends did not and perhaps could not defend him, because there was no identity or community that was capable of political representation. The state and media made men like Arvin into stereotypes that called out to be crushed by those same institutions.

In Arvin’s academic world, the notion of lesbian/gay/queer studies was unimaginable. Yet in the past 30 years we have imagined and created just such sites. In the model of African American and Women’s studies programs, queer studies has been the result of an aggressive identity politics—and such programs are one way to announce our visibility. The question is how? Several articles in *Radical Teacher* address the dilemma of being institutionalized within the academy into and as a respectable discipline, yet being assigned a narrow and tenuous status and space—a center, not a department. This status offers both serious drawbacks as well as some advantages.

On the one hand all these studies programs continue to be marginalized, ghettoized, segregated. On the other, being a bit on the side, a little less important and visible, allows for greater flexibility and freedom. Cheryl Clarke describes the kinds of programs she can launch “that disclose the links of race and gender to sexuality” in “Out’ Outside the Classroom: The Co-Curricular Challenge” (RT).

Visibilities in the backlash

In both GCN and RA, several writers take up the backlash against gay visibility in rightwing campaigns and the resulting complexity of our efforts to represent ourselves. Both Suzanne Pharr, “Community Organizing and the Religious Right: Lessons from Oregon’s Measure Nine Campaign” (RA, pt.1) and Susan Hibbard, “Reading Between the Lines: Race and Sexuality in Rightwing (and Gay) Campaigns” (GCN) address how the possibilities for representation were strangled by the campaign format of sound-bites and the “special rights” language of the Right. In the video “Gay Rights, Special Rights” our images were appropriated and turned against us in order to characterize lesbians/gays/queers as wealthy white men and/or sexually obsessed, diseased monsters who assault the family and demand “special rights” rather than an end to discrimination. The rightwing video simultaneously accuses gay people of usurping the language of the (now) legitimate African American Civil Rights movement and argues against civil rights for all disenfranchised groups.

The Right’s strategy had a powerful impact on the gay defense campaigns in Oregon and Colorado. Some elements succumbed to liberal fears of offending white heterosexuals and to internalized homophobia, racism, sexism and classism. According to Suzanne Pharr this led the official gay campaign to focus on discrimination in the abstract and to thus exclude “a visible presence of lesbians and gay men.” It led to a focus on vote-getting, which meant excluding all kinds of people who wanted to get involved. It thwarted the opportunity to build a movement and it produced a spirit of competition between different groups fighting Ballot Measure Nine. As Pharr says, “So the campaign violated what I think is one of the bottomline principles of organizing which is ‘do no harm.’”

The same kind of scenario of division, claims of reverse victimization, and resentment politics is described in the two articles by N’Tanya Lee, et al. (in *RT* and *RA*, pt.2) on the rise and fall of the Rainbow Curriculum in the New York City public schools. The Right was able to divide and stereotype identifiable elements in the progressive coalition that promoted and supported the Rainbow Curriculum. They set up predetermined oppositional identities: working class, heterosexual, family-oriented people of color versus rich, white, gay men (with AIDS). Commenting on the fight for and over the Rainbow Curriculum in New York City, N’Tanya Lee, et al quote “a white gay man”:

Last night, at the Central Board, Black parents were yelling “White faggots” at ACT UP members, and ACT UP men were yelling back “Black Racists.” It was one of the most depressing spectacles I’ve ever seen.

These are examples of the way the Right can twist identity politics against us. First, the Right claims, in this instance, that identities are unequivocally separate (Black, or gay, for example—but never Black and gay). Second, they claim that for one identity to reinterpret the successful strategies of another is an insult. Third, groups deemed legitimate by the Right are granted the “right” to (re)identify “illegitimate” groups clamoring for equal civil rights as necessarily outside the possibility of legitimacy. Fourth, powerful institutions like the mainstream media have the “right” to (re)make identities into official targets or scapegoats. This is possible for two reasons. One, because the notion of rights has been demeaned—downsized from the concept of full recognition, full participation in and transformation of social/political relations—into a series of minimal demands. Two, this is possible because the concept of identity politics has also been demeaned.

Self-representation, self-determination has been understood as a powerful act, an act of power—"I’m a woman and I’m strong," "I’m Black and I’m proud." But today, such identities have come to be seen as an expression of victimization: "I’m a woman and I’m a victim of sexism," "I’m Black and I’m a victim of racism." This is easily turned around to "I’m a white man and I’m a victim of affirmative action." My point is not to deny the reality of victimization but to show how the power we have sought in
identity politics can be turned against us in the cry of reverse discrimination.

Places at the table

Two narrowing and constraining forces are at work here: the force of normalization produced by the desire to be a part of legitimate society and the force of exclusion produced by a scarcity mentality—there are only so many places at the table and you can only do one thing/issue at time. As Suzanne Pharr argues, in order to fight this mentality,

What you have to do is education: you have to change the hearts and minds of people so that they understand that it’s about gay men and lesbians, and it’s about democracy, and it’s about civil rights for everyone, and it’s about attacks against affirmative action, and it’s about attacks against reproductive choice.

One of the critical questions these articles raise for the lesbian/gay/queer community is how can we work to represent ourselves without excluding differences and diversity, assimilating them or turning them into competitors? Robert Reid-Pharr in the “Spectacle of Blackness” (RA, pt.1) notes the increased attention paid to Black lesbian and gay culture by white lesbians and gays. He sees it in part as “a certain yearning...for some sort of resolution to the tragic history of racial antagonism and distrust that has arguably been our culture’s most salient characteristic.” I am continually struck by my own attempts and those of other white progressives, gay and straight, to see and hear “Others,” to respectfully connect and work together, to know how their “otherness” constitutes my possibilities of cultural identity (and how my “otherness” constitutes theirs). Yet our attempts at diversity education/organizing are often either crushed like the Rainbow curriculum or turned into a new form of academic tourism without interaction. Perhaps what we are really looking for in “Others,” what ultimately makes them recognizable, is our own reflection, some aspect of ourselves. Is it ever possible to “see” people in and on their own terms?

Queer possibilities and plenty

One response to these dilemmas is to continue the projects of these journals to deconstruct the limitations of identity politics. The debate about the term “queer” that overtly and covertly flows through these articles raises questions about the problems of identity. Queer is a much more amorphous and fluid designation than gay, lesbian, bisexual, even transgender. Who does it include/exclude and when? For me, queerness exudes a politics of possibility and plenty—suggesting that as we organize our representations and represent our organizing, we can build a movement that involves all those who wish to be involved. All our possibilities and impossibilities. This undoubtedly sounds utopian and therefore perhaps out of joint with these closed and mean-spirited times. But perhaps these times demand nothing less than a politics of (im)possibilities and plenty, of imagination and pleasure. One example is the series of safe sex “Read My Lips” posters of colorfully diverse gay and straight couples kissing. Quite a riposte to Dirty Harry and George Bush.

Perhaps the most vivid example for me of “querness” as a politic was the GCN article “Mother Mike and Bobbie Lee: Medicine from inside the Walls” by Amy Hoffman. Mother Mike is Mike Rieglo, who ran the GCN Prisoner Project for many years until he died of AIDS. He corresponded with prisoners, sending them information and support, and he solicited their writings for the paper. One of his correspondent friends, Bobbie Lee White, a political and spiritual Native and African-American man, sent Mike a wristband and medicine bag he had made in prison when Mike was very sick. Amy included Bobbie Lee’s letter in which he describes his gifts to Mike, how he made them, what they mean.

Bobbie Lee calls Mike “Mother”—his friend who connects when connection seems impossible, who shares hope, unconditional love and respect under untenable conditions. Bobbie Lee also gives Mike gifts, words and parenthetical smiles of friendship, hope and healing in a hopeless situation. I read their exchange as the possibility of representation and connection against all odds, produced by a generosity of spirit, knowledge, culture and pleasure.

Given the tremendous difficulties of sustaining progressive visibility in the end of the millennium, it’s impressive that these journals keep publishing. If you want to support and participate in their efforts, here is their subscription information.

- Radical Teacher, PO Box 102, Kendall Square Post Office, Cambridge, MA 02142. Sustaining subs $35; employed $8; part-time, unemployed, retired, $4.
- Radical America, One Summer Street, Somerville, MA 02143. $22/year, $17 unemployed/low-income.
- Gay Community News, 25 West Street, Boston, MA 02111. $35 for ten issues.

Kate Gyllensvold is a graduate student in European History and a longtime participant in lesbian/gay politics in Boston.
In this issue of the newsletter we feature grants made to groups working on lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender issues. The information is provided to us by the groups themselves. For more details, please write to them at the addresses included here.

Gay Community News
Bromfield Street Educational Foundation
25 West Street
Boston, MA 02111

In the summer of 1992, after 19 years of uninterrupted weekly publishing, accumulated debt forced Gay Community News to stop the presses. During meetings over several months, former staff and supporters of the community-based paper produced a reorganized format and business plan to lead GCN back to stable financial ground. By April of 1993, a first issue was back on the press in time for the Lesbian and Gay March on Washington. By the fall of that year, the progressive paper had resumed publication—this time as a quarterly journal of political commentary and cultural critique.

In this spring of 1995, Gay Community News continues as a quarterly—with a grant from RESIST toward the current issue—and with plans to eventually begin monthly publishing. RESIST has been a steadfast supporter of the paper, with grants going back as far as 1983 for projects including a special three-part issue on class in lesbian/gay communities, the Gay and Lesbian Prisoner Project and a new copier.

While the format of the paper has changed, its politics have not. Long considered the leading gay voice for social change, GCN continues to put race, class, and sex on center stage. Recent articles have taken on the new gay conservatives, the racial politics of the religious Right's anti-gay campaigns, as well as the unfair labor practices of "gay-friendly" corporations and the pitiful care given to prisoners with AIDS.

The umbrella group for GCN is the Bromfield Street Educational Foundation, which continues to operate the Gay and Lesbian Prisoner Project, the annual queer writers' conference — Out/Write — and a Boston-based reading and lecture series.

To subscribe to Gay Community News, which continues to depend on donations for its survival, send $35 for ten issues to GCN, 25 West St., Boston MA 02111.

Outreach to Rural Youth-Washington
P.O. Box 327
Yakima, WA 98907

In the spring of 1994, Outreach to Rural Youth joined a lawsuit to stop two anti-gay initiatives from being placed on the November ballot. The group's amicus brief testified to the harm done to gay, lesbian and bisexual youth during discrimination campaigns. They cited evidence gathered during the anti-gay initiative drives in Colorado and Oregon of increased suicide risk, substance abuse and depression. While the Washington State Supreme Court dismissed the case without a hearing, Outreach to Rural Youth decided to organize young people in the state to take direct action against the initiatives.

RESIST's recent grant supported this campaign, entitled Washington YAH! (Youth Against Hate) Project. Young people aged 14-21 took part in non-violent social change trainings that focused on public and personal speaking skills, community organizing, and non-violent conflict resolution.

Youth involved with the project, including an 18-year-old lesbian who is the president of the Board, have spoken widely in the state and conducted workshops for public and private school administrators, faculty and staff as well as community service organizations and churches. The group also provides conferences and other resources for gay youth and attempts to identify "safe" schools and personnel, clergy, clubs and organizations, and counseling services.

Asian and Pacific Islander Homosexuality/Homophobia Education Project
P.O. Box 3161
Seattle, WA 98144

Two years ago, a group of Seattle Asian and Pacific Islander (API) lesbians and gay men gathered to discuss the expected impact of the rising Christian right wing movement in the Northwest on their ethnic communities. The participants discussed the Right's relative success on anti-immigration and English-only agendas, and they expressed particular concern about the lack of accurate information about homosexuality in their communities. Out of these discussions was formed a new community-based organization that fills a void of organized support for API gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender concerns in Seattle.

RESIST's grant supports the project's Speakers Bureau, which provides culturally appropriate education to the Seattle API community about homosexuality. While barriers to organizing remain large, the group hopes to educate and organize the API community in support of lesbian and gay civil rights—and to make connections between civil rights struggles. The group faces both the erasure of the existence of sexual minorities among APIs and racism and cultural barriers within the gay movement.

While many communities lack accurate information about homosexuality, API communities confront particular barriers to access, including language and cultural differences. In addition, the group cites historical anti-communist sentiment and belief in traditional family structures as increasing community vulnerability to the divide-and-conquer tactics of the right.

Join the RESIST Pledge Program

☐ Yes! I would like to become a RESIST Pledge. I'd like to pledge $________________________ (circle one)

☐ monthly

☐ bimonthly

☐ quarterly

☐ 2x a year

☐ yearly

Enclosed is my pledge contribution of $________________________.

☐ I can't join the pledge program just now, but here's a contribution to support your work. $________________________.

Name________________________

Address________________________

City/State/Zip________________________

RESIST
One Summer Street • Somerville, MA 02143 • (617)623-5110

May/June, 1995