
BLACKS AND GAYS: *Healing the Great Divide*

Examples

By Barbara Smith

In 1993, it has been declared that two essential aspects of my identity are at war with one another. As a person of color, a lesbian, and a feminist, I've spent a great deal of energy refusing to let others pit the various elements of who I am against each other. I always maintain that these elements only *seem* to be in opposition in this particular time and place, under U.S. capitalism, whose functioning has always required that large groups of people be economically, racially and sexually oppressed, and that these potentially dissident groups be kept divided from each other at all costs.

For the first time, however, the relationship between the African American and gay communities is being widely debated both within and outside of movement circles, and surviving as a Black lesbian or gay man has become that much harder. Catalysts for this discussion have been gay leaders' cavalier comparisons between lifting the military ban and racially desegregating the armed forces following World War II, and the decision by the NAACP and other Black civil rights organizations to speak out in favor of lesbian and gay rights and to support the March on Washington. Those decisions have met with protests from some sectors of the Black community and have also spurred the debate.

Ironically, the group of people who are least often consulted about their perspectives on this great divide are those who are most deeply affected by it: Black lesbian and gay activists. Contradictions that we have been grappling with for years, namely homophobia in the Black community, racism in the gay community, and the need for both communities to work together as allies to defeat our real enemies, are suddenly on other people's minds. Because Black lesbians and gays are not thought of as leaders in either movement, however, this debate has been largely framed by those who have frighteningly little and inaccurate information.

Thanks in part to the white gay community's own public relations campaigns, Black Americans view the gay community as uniformly wealthy, highly privileged and politically powerful, a group that has suffered nothing like the centuries of degradation caused by U.S. racism. Rev. Dennis Kuby, a civil rights activist, states in a letter to the *New York Times*: "Gays are not subject to water hoses and police dogs, denied access to lunch counters, or prevented from voting." But most Blacks have no idea that we are threatened with the loss of employment, housing and custody of our children, and are subject to verbal abuse, gay bashing, and death at the hands of homophobes. Kuby's statement also does not acknowledge Black lesbians and gays who have been subjected to all of the racist abuse he cites.

Because we are rendered invisible in both Black and gay contexts, it is that much easier for the Black community to oppose gay rights and to express homophobia without recognizing that these attacks and the lack of legal protections affects its own members.

The racism that has pervaded the mainstream gay movement only fuels the perceived divisions between Blacks and gays. Single issue politics, unlike gay organizing that is consciously and strategically connected to the overall struggle for social and economic justice, do nothing to convince Blacks that gays actually care about eradicating racial oppression. At the very same time that some gays make blanket comparisons between the gay movement and the Black civil rights movement, they also assume that Black and other people of color have won all our battles and are in terrific shape in comparison with gays.

In a December, 1992 interview in the *Dallas Voice*, lesbian publisher Barbara Grier stated: "We are the last minority group unfairly legislated against in the U. S." Grier's perception is, of course, inaccurate. Legislation negatively affecting people of color, immigrants, disabled people, and women occurs every day, especially when court decisions that undermine legal protections are taken into account.

In 1991, well before the relationship between the gay community and the Black community was a hot topic, Andrew Sullivan, editor of *The New Republic*, asserted the following in *The Advocate*.

"The truth is, our position is far worse than that of any ethnic minority or heterosexual women."

Every fundamental civil right has already been granted to these groups. The issues that they discuss now involve nuances of affirmative action, comparable pay and racial quotas. Gay people, however, still live constitutionally in the South of the '50s

Sullivan's cynical distortions ignore that quality of life is determined by much more than legislation. Clearly, he also knows nothing about the institution of slavery. Joblessness, poverty, racist and sexist violence, and the lack of decent housing, health care and education make the lives of many "ethnic minorities" and "heterosexual women" a living hell. But Sullivan doesn't care about these folks. He just wants to make sure he gets what he thinks he deserves as a powerful white male.

Lesbians and gay men of color have been trying to push the gay movement to grasp the necessity of anti-racist practice for nigh onto 20 years. Except in the context of organizing within the women's movement with progressive white lesbian feminists, we haven't made much progress.

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I'm particularly struck by the fact that, for the most part, queer theory and politics, which are so popular, offer neither substantial anti-racist analysis nor practice. Queer activists' understanding of how to deal with race is usually limited to their including a few lesbians or gay men of color in their ranks, who are expected to carry out the political agenda that the white majority has already determined, and/or sleeping with people of color.

This month Lesbian Avengers from New York City will travel to several states in the Northeast on what they are calling a "Freedom Ride." When lesbians of color from Albany, New York pointed out that the appropriation of this term is offensive because the organization has no demonstrated involvement in anti-racist organizing and has made no links with people of color, including non-lesbians and gays in the communities they plan to visit. Even when we explained that calling themselves "Freedom Riders" might negatively affect the coalitions we've been working to build with people of color in Albany, the group kept the name and really made token changes in their press prelease.

The Right Targets Communities of Color

These divisions are particularly dangerous at a time

when the white right wing has actually targeted people of color with their homophobic message. As white lesbian activist Suzanne Pharr points out in "Racist Politics and Homophobia" (*Transformation*, July/August 1993):

"Community by community, the religious Right works skillfully to divide us along fissures that already exist. It is as though they have a political seismograph to locate the racism and sexism in the lesbian and gay community, the sexism and homophobia in communities of color. While the Right is united by their racism, sexism and homophobia in their goal to dominate all of us, we are divided by our own racism, sexism, and homophobia."

The Right's divisive strategy of enlisting the Black community's support for their homophobic campaign literally hit home for me in June. A Black lesbian who lives in Cleveland, Ohio where I grew up, called to tell me that a group of Black ministers had placed a virulently homophobic article in Cleveland's Black newspaper, *The Call and Post*.

Entitled "The Black Church Position Statement on Homosexuality," the ministers condemn "HOMOSEXUALITY (including bisexual as well as gay or lesbian sexual activity) as a lifestyle that is contrary to the teachings of the Bible." Although they claim

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to have tolerance and compassion for homosexuals, their ultimate goal is to bring about "restoration," i. e., changing lesbians and gays back into heterosexuals in order "to restore such individuals back into harmony with God's will." One of the several sources they cite to prove that such "restoration" is possible is the Traditional Values Foundation Talking Points, 1993, a publication of the Traditional Values Coalition.

The ministers also held a meeting and announced their goal to gather 100,00 signatures in Cleveland in opposition to the federal gay and lesbian civil rights bill, HB 431, and to take their campaign to Detroit and Pittsburgh. A major spokesperson for the ministers, Rev. Marvin McMichol, is the minister of Antioch Baptist Church, the church I was raised in and of which the women in my family were pillars. Antioch was on a number of levels one of the most progressive congregations in Cleveland, especially because of the political leadership it provided at a time when Black people were not allowed to participate in any aspect of Cleveland's civic life.

McMichol states, "It is our fundamental, reasoned belief that there is no comparison between the status of Blacks and women, and the status of gays and lesbians." He explains that being Black or female is an "ontological reality ... a fact that cannot be hidden." whereas "homosexuality is a chosen life-

style ... defined by behavior not ontological reality."

By coincidence, I met Rev. McMichol in May when Naomi Jaffe, an activist friend from Albany, and I did a presentation on Black and Jewish relations at the invitation of Cleveland's New Jewish Agenda. Antioch Baptist Church and a synagogue co-sponsored the event. My cousin had informed me that McMichol had just stepped down as head of the NAACP. Naomi and I were struck by his coldness to us throughout the evening. This was in sharp contrast to the kind reception we received from both the Black and Jewish participants, most of whom were elder women. We guessed that it was because of his homophobia and sexism. Little did we know at the time how right we were.

When I first got news of what was going on in my home town I was emotionally devastated. It would have been bad enough to find out about a major Black-led homophobic campaign in any city in this country, but this place wasn't an abstraction, it was where I came from. It was while growing up in Cleveland that I first felt attracted to women and it was also in Cleveland that I grasped the impossibility of ever acting upon those feelings. Cleveland is a huge city with a small town mentality. Now I was being challenged to deal with homophobia, dead up, in the Black community at home.

I enlisted the help of NGLTF and Scot Nakagawa who runs their Fight the Right office in Portland,

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Oregon and of members of the Feminist Action Network (FAN), the multi-racial political group I belong to in Albany. Throughout the summer we were in constant contact with people in Cleveland. FAN drafted a counter petition for them to circulate and in early September several of us went there following NGLTF's and Stonewall Cincinnati's Fight the Right Midwest Summit. Unfortunately, by the time we arrived, the group that had been meeting in Cleveland had fallen apart.

We had several meetings, primarily with Black lesbians, but found very few people who were willing to confront the severe threat right in their midst. Most of the women we met even refused to acknowledge the seriousness of the ministers' campaign. We had been warned that remaining closeted prevented activism, but we also found a deep reluctance to deal with Black people in Cleveland's inner city, because of both closeting and class divisions. Cleveland's white lesbian and gay community had never proven itself to be particularly supportive of anti-racist work, and racial segregation seemed to characterize the gay community, just as it does the city as whole.

I cannot say that our efforts to support a visible challenge to the ministers in Cleveland was particularly successful. The right wing's ability to speak to the concerns and play upon the fears of those it wishes to recruit; the lack of visionary political leadership, locally and nationally, among both Black and white lesbians and gays; and the difficulty

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of countering homo-phobia in a Black context, especially when it is justified by religious pronouncements, make this kind of organizing exceedingly hard. But we had better learn how to do it

quickly and extremely well if we do not want the Christian right wing to end up running this country.

Since returning from Cleveland we have been exploring the possibility of launching a nationwide petition campaign to gather at least 100,000 signatures from Black people who support lesbian and gay rights. One Black woman, Janet Perkins, a heterosexual Christian who works with the Women's Project in Little Rock, Arkansas has already spoken out. In a courageous article entitled, "The Religious Right: Dividing the African American Community" (*Transformation*, September/October 1993) Perkins calls upon the ministers in Cleveland and the entire Black church to practice love instead of condemnation. She writes:

These African-American ministers fail to understand they have been drawn into a plot that has as its mission to further separate, divide and place additional pressure on African-Americans so they are unable to come together to work on the problems of the community

What is needed in our community is a unity and bond that can't be broken by anyone. We must see every aspect of our community as valuable and worth protecting, and yes, we must give full membership to our sisters and brothers who are homosexual. For all these years we have seen them, now we must start to hear them and respect them for who they are.

This is the kind of risk-taking and integrity that makes all the difference. Perkins publicly declares herself an ally whom we can depend upon. I hope in the months to come the gay and lesbian movement in this country will likewise challenge itself to close this great divide, which it can only do by working toward an unbreakable unity, a bond across

racet, nationalities and classes that up until now this movement has never had.

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