

Mickey Wheatley

or the women's movement ever took place. We don't take advantage of known methodologies or profit from past mistakes.

Women are still struggling to avoid being subsumed under male prerogatives. Black gay men and lesbians don't trust white organizations and don't trust ourselves enough to challenge the status quo, so we keep playing out victim roles. White activists and organizations recruit just enough blacks, just before someone notices that their efforts are all-white. Gay men still can't say "feminist" without smirking. Lesbian and gay activists have not learned to take any type of constructive criticism.

The greatest threat to the visions of freedom that I hold dear is still the power the US culture invests in being white and male. Being gay doesn't seem to have mitigated that threat at all.

A few things have changed in the past twenty years, but it is the loss of naiveté that feels the most significant—the realization that we, in our thirsts for power, our wallowing in self-pity, our self-centeredness, our ignorance, our arrogance can be our own worst enemy. This is a land "wrought with wars" and we are a people "as old as the earth." It is the destructiveness of adolescence I fear.

*Jewelle Gomez is the author of a collection of poetry, *Flamingoes and Bears*, and is a poetry editor for OUT/LOOK.*

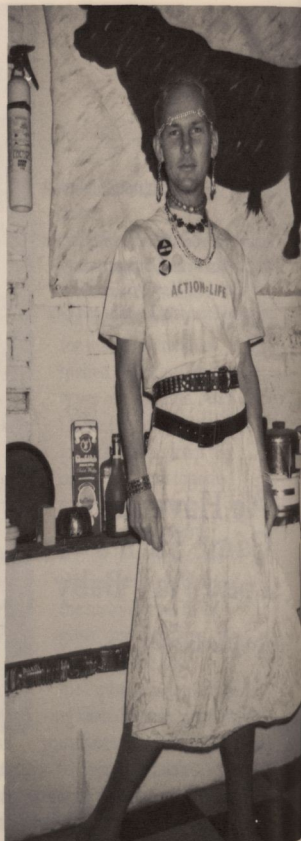
Beyond the Melting Pot

Mickey Wheatley

TWENTY YEARS AGO, on the night of Judy Garland's funeral, gay people rioted in Greenwich Village, militantly demanding for the first time that we be treated with respect. It was not mainstream gays who started the Stonewall Revolution; it was outrageous drag queens who finally had no choice but to riot.

In the last twenty years, our movement has lost sight of the value of our diversity. Many supporters of the lesbian and gay liberation movement have forgotten that our people are made up of drag queens, butch lesbians, s/m leather boys, vegetarians, day-glo hippies, radical faeries, separatist lesbians, boy lovers, queer anarchists, witches, queer punks, pagans, and everyone else with a "separatist" bent whose focus is more cultural than narrowly "political," whose concern is with being most truly herself.

There is tension between the mainstream "assimilationist" gays and the more flamboyant, outrageous separatists. Assimilationism seeks to integrate lesbian and gay people into the dominant heterosexual culture by gaining us legal rights and acceptance. Separatism, on the other hand, eschews assimilation because it is more concerned with discovering who we really are. I believe that the goals of these two ostensibly polar currents informing the consciousness of our movement are not so contradictory and that they actually complement



each other.

In the seventies, liberal gay organizations were created with the intention of gaining mainstream acceptance of the lesbian and gay "lifestyle." The notion was to demonstrate that "we are just like you except for what we do in bed."

The tactics of these assimilationist institutions have created visibility for our community in the mainstream media. More judges are writing better opinions that reflect a real understanding of our issues. Our issues are now openly discussed in Congress and other government lawmaking bodies. Many cities have actually enacted civil rights ordinances protecting our legal rights to housing, employment, and public accommodations, and provide ready mechanisms for seeking redress.

At the same time, however, assimilationism has undermined the Stonewall vision of liberation for all the members of our community. Those members of our community who have not demonstrated a middle-class, heterosexual personal style have been kept from our leadership roles, and from the images we have created to define ourselves. Of course, the fallout from this approach is that our movement and community institutions fail to address the needs of all members of our diverse family, particularly lesbians, people of color, poor gays, rural gays, and those who are sexual and cultural minorities within our own communities.

Those lesbian and gay people frustrated with the assimilationist approach have been organizing into more expressly counter-cultural, separatist movements such as the Radical Faeries for men and separatist collectives for women. These groups have worked to create truly supportive community structures for themselves that have allowed the groups to focus inwardly on the ways in which we are uniquely oppressed, and how our oppression has worked at denying us knowledge of our innate nature and gifts as lesbian and gay people.

But the patriarchal hate directed against us has been too strong, and the AIDS crisis too overwhelming, for us to be able to turn our backs on the dominant culture. Separatism, by itself, fails to build the bridges necessary to create a progressive culture, however supported we feel when we are truly and radically with our own community

of friends and loved ones.

Thus, separatists need assimilationists to educate the courts, legislatures, and the rest of heterosexual culture about our lives and issues because we cannot escape state oppression, whether it takes the form of separating us from our children or lovers, prohibiting the full expression of our sexuality, or

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allowing us to continue to grow sick and to die.

Yet assimilationists should not ask the rest of us to cultivate a more heterosexual or mainstream personal style or politics—just as they refuse to become heterosexual. Putting on a three-piece suit does not change the fact that we are still largely despised because we represent a major threat to patriarchal culture. Our politics and personalities are as central to us as our sexual orientation, and should be celebrated, not oppressed. We cannot win our liberation by becoming our oppressors, but rather by becoming most fully and openly ourselves. Let's challenge our oppressors and each other to embrace differences of sexual orientation and lifestyle.

So let's stop dishing each other; because together we can create a force whose emanations will be felt throughout the world and for decades into the future. The separatists will provide us with vision, magic, and healing, and the assimilationists will mediate between us and our oppressors so that each of us can create our own "safe space," whatever that may be.

Mickey Wheatley is a gay rights attorney and a radical faerie.

Paranoia Is Passé

John D'Emilio

I THINK THE BIGGEST internal obstacle the lesbian and gay movement face today is that our psyches have not caught up with our successes.

As a historian, I can't help but be aware of how far-reaching our successes have been since Stonewall. We permanently have shattered the invisibility and isolation that characterized most gay and lesbian life through the late 1960s. We have built an extraordinary range of organizations and community-based institutions, many of them stable and secure. We have reached into almost every corner of American society, done ground breaking educational work, built coalitions, and won allies for our agenda. We have made major cracks in the structure of institutionalized oppression. When we consider the enormity of what we faced at the time of the Stonewall riots, the level of our achievement is astounding.