

Advisors to the Advisors

**"Knock, knock" "Who's there?" "Agenda"
"Who's Agenda?"**

by M. Romo-Carmona

In December 1990 members of Queer Nation (QN) complained that the New York Historical Society (NYHS) had practiced systematic suppression of lesbian and gay history, and in particular had ignored the AIDS crisis. QN activists focused on the NYHS following an exhibit entitled "Art What Thou Eat," which included a piece by a man they considered rabidly homophobic (Mark Kostabi). In a predictable chain of events, attempts at inclusiveness were made by established institutions in New York City and requested input from established gay historians (namely Martin Duberman and Jonathan Katz, who didn't like playing the role of tokens much, and said so).

On July 7, 1992 the Stonewall History Project was announced. Forming a coalition effort, the Brooklyn Historical Society, the New York Historical Society, the Museum of the City of New York, and the New York Public Library become sort of a Western "Gang of Four" in our midsts. Ironically, they identify CLAGS (Center for Lesbian & Gay Studies, CUNY Graduate Center), their fifth partner in this planned historical exhibition of Lesbian & Gay Culture for 1994, as their "grass-roots" focus in the lesbian & gay community.

Meanwhile, CLAGS is hardly viewed by the majority of us as very accessible. Controversial from its inception, CLAGS suffers from lack of recognition from its academic peers, lack of funds, and lack of support from the lesbian and gay communities at large.

How might we look at the phenomenon that is developing? How to deal with the increasing feeling among gay and lesbian People of Color that this is not our agenda,

much less our exhibit?

A his-torical example: In 1688, a Spanish Jesuit priest was entrusted with the only remaining book of history and myth written by indigenous people in "the Americas," *The Popol Vuh*. The surviving Quiché people of Guatemala re-wrote this history of their civilization using the Castillian alphabet in the mid-1500's, after libraries and temples and the entire city of Utatlán was destroyed by the conquerors. The priest copied the book and translated it into 17th-century Spanish, giving

This is not a balanced meal and populations are not the same as food groups

rise to three centuries of scholarship on the Quiché language, their civilization and mythology.

This being 1992, the 500th anniversary of European occupation in this continent, it is significant to ponder the value of civilization and culture, and who ultimately gets to control the study of, as well as to receive the rewards from, conducting such scholarship on a group of people.

The 300-year-old copy of the *Popol Vuh*, for example, is not the property of the descendants of the

Quiché. It is kept at the Newberry Library in Chicago. In fact, the was not published

in Guatemala in contemporary Spanish until 1944.

With this example as back-ground—or perhaps as model—to

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POC Recommendations to SHP

"Dear Editors — I spoke to Lidell earlier today, October 28th, about the Stonewall History Project and about the article written about it for the November issue of *COLORLife!* I thought you might want to see the recommendations and report that were presented by the People of Color who attended the Planning Conference here in New York during the weekend of September 11th-12th. This conference was a gathering of academics, writers, critics and activists, with expertise in lesbian and gay life from the 17th Century to the present, who met with museum personnel to brainstorm about the critical themes and issues related to lesbian and gay history. "The following recommendations were presented verbally to the conference as a whole, and followed extensive discussion among the conference

participants about the necessity for the exhibits to include the history and culture of lesbians and gay men of color. My sense of the response to these recommendations was that the vast majority of those who attended were very open to and supportive of them, and indeed since issues of multiculturalism and anti-racism were raised at the very beginning of the conference, this consciousness about the absolute necessity to be inclusive affected the entire rest of the meeting.

"The academic conference was only one aspect of a multi-faceted planning process. The Project is also relying on extensive community involvement by holding public community meetings and forming a Community Advisory Committee

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Astraea Honors Lesbian Writers

by Eva Yaa Asantewaa

On October 5, the Astraea National Lesbian Action Foundation held its first annual Lesbian Writers Fund gala, honoring the 1991 and 1992 winning writers. This buoyant event drew together lesbians and supporters from the worlds of politics, activism, and business as well as the arts. It was the October place to see and be seen as a large, cheerful audience, leaning towards the well-heeled and handsomely-dressed, gathered in New York City's Union Square Theatre. Emcee Joan Nestle called it "[our] Academy Awards and a mix of other things."

The Astraea Lesbian Writers Fund, established through a \$350,000 gift from writer, publisher, and self-described "rich bitch" Joan Drury, each year presents grants of \$11,000 to five emerging poets and fiction writers. In addition, the Astraea Board of Directors selects one established writer to receive the Fund's \$5,000 Sappho Award of Distinction: This year's award went to Gloria Anzaldúa, author of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and co-editor of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. The 1992 winners for fiction are Kelley Eskridge (Atlanta, GA), Linda Morgenstein (Iowa City, IA), and Kyna [REDACTED]

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examine the circumstances leading to the formation of the Stonewall History Project reveals important patterns about the role of disenfranchised people within the traditional style of documentation. We don't know what has gone on behind the scenes. Who the major players were—in the cool and quiet rooms of museums and historical societies, where curators who were characterized by QN's targeted homophobe as being the closeted gay men who controlled the arts during

(Ithaca, NY).
Janice Gould
(Albuquerque,
NM) and Ruth
Schwartz
(Oakland, CA)

are the honored poets. It was especially gratifying to see awards go to two lesbians of color—Taylor, an African-American writer currently studying at Cornell University and working on a novel, and Janice Gould, a member of the Maidu tribe of Northern California and author of the poetry collection, *Beneath My Heart*.

The gala included readings by 1991 award recipients Melinda Goodman, Mariana Romo-Carmona, Yasmin V. Tambiah, and Magdalena Zschokke. Ana María Simo, another 1991 winner, chose to use her reading time to exhort the audience to support the New York City Board of Education's Children of the Rainbow curriculum. "Lesbianism is a new humanism," she declared. "It's not something that we do at home... We have to fight every minute of the day to remember that our lives are one, that we are whole."

Featured artist Dorothy Allison, National Book Award nominee for her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* and one of several judges who reviewed Astraea's pool of more than 700 applicants, sounded the evening's recurring theme in her emotionally compelling segment. "I know that telling stories is an act of resistance," she said, later adding, "The story they tell you you're not supposed to

tell is the story you need to tell." Speaking in the voice of a smart, smart-mouthed tomboy growing up to one day threaten her incestuous stepfather with a butcher knife, she drew sympathetic sounds from the audience. "If I was not a lesbian, I would never have begun to write," Allison said. "I wouldn't be alive today."

The evening also celebrated the pleasure that is never very far from our anger and our politics. Writers such as Romo-Carmona and Anzaldúa, demonstrated the fluidity of language, the sweet juice and magic in words and phrasing. Goodman, a crowd-pleaser, cooked up saucy, funny scenes that pulled us into them. Tambiah, a Sri Lankan poet and author of *Trekking: From Exile to Return*, reminded us that being honestly sexual is—for women, for lesbians, and so much more for lesbians of color—a profound act of de-colonization of the body and the self.

In Anzaldúa's words, lesbian writing is essential because it is "a door to the future self, to transformation." Astraea Executive Director Katherine Acey says lesbian writers are "among today's visionaries." But for lesbian writers to envision and shape the future, they need to be able to survive today and to afford to purchase the tools of their trade. To this end, the Astraea Lesbian Writers Fund offers much-needed material as well as moral support, a grand and meaningful thank you from the lesbian world.

the 80's, somehow contributed to the plan for the '94 exhibit.

We do know we weren't there. But it was done, announced to the community from above, almost in a "for your own good" tone, with an August 12 date fixed for a community meeting open to those interested, and a September planning conference for invited panelists.

In early July 1992 a paid Project Director materializes. Several newspapers herald the history project as a collaboration of the gang-of-four, barely mentioning CLAGS. When mentioned CLAGS is referred to as

the "intellectual engine and liaison to the lesbian and gay community." An Executive Director for the project, who travels coast to coast announcing the plans, urges us to contribute memorabilia—rusting buttons and yellowing flyers from somebody's desk drawer will become tagged, dated, and valuable artifacts to display behind glass.

We can see it now: the gratifying pats-on-the-back for unearthing these jewels, as though we didn't know what we had all these years. My mind repeats a line from Sappho's

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Our last two editions of Colorlife have quite comprehensively addressed the issue of 500 Years of Survival and Resistance of Indigenous Peoples.

However, contrary to the increased focus that this issue has received recently, this hasn't been an issue of importance for just two months. It's an issue of occupation, oppression, resistance and survival that People of Color have faced for centuries.

Within the lesbian and gay People of Color community we had started more than a year ago setting aside plans to address the issue of 500 Years, culminating in a special event that would be planned for October 12, 1992. Realizing its significance as an issue that affects us all, we knew it was important to commemorate the consistent struggle of all of our communities of color—a struggle that continues to the present day.

To facilitate this process, earlier this summer one of the members of We Wah and Bar Chee Ampe: Native Two Spirits in NYC, the Native American lesbian and gay group, had suggested the creation of an "Eat-In/Teach-In" on October 12th—an event geared to provide all of us the opportunity to learn about this issue and share our reflections with one another. It was conceived as an Eat-In because it was noted that within the Native American community,

Sharing Our Truths

by Lidell Jackson

as within many other People of Color communities, a great deal of teaching, learning and sharing is done during meals—"breaking bread" as a way of creating a safe and supportive common ground for interaction.

Even as October drew near, with the vast number of activities created around the issue of 500 Years, it became apparent that the energies and resources of the Native American community were being called upon in many different areas. The various aspects involved in addressing this issue on so many different levels precluded their being able to be involved in any specific action on October 12th planned by our communities.

At first it seemed that we would have to forego having an event on that day, in deference to the fact that the Native American Two Spirited community could

not be involved. But again, here's where The Lesbian and Gay People Of Color Steering Committee—the coalition of NYC-based lesbian and gay People of Color organizations—showed its value as a resource. Meetings and discussions among the participating groups confirmed that there was a pressing need for all of us, in all our communities, to address this issue. We were consistently reminded of the fact that as People of Color we all have histories of oppression, resistance, struggle, survival!

So, we came together—on Monday, October 12th at The Center Of The Rainbow—to share our experiences, nurture each other's growth, and reclaim our histories as People of Color—in an environment that created a particularly strong sense of family and purpose.

And what an incredible event it was! Starting off with an excel-



Color Life held a teach-in to commemorate the past 500 years of colonialization of Native peoples in the United States

Let's use this occasion to plan more joint community events that will serve to teach, inform, strengthen, nurture, and revitalize us all!

Photo by June Chan

lent potluck feast and community dinner, the evening featured presentations and sharing by some of the most vital members of our community—Mariana Romo-Carmona, Marjorie Hill, Valli Kanuha, Bino Almonte-Realuyo, Eric [REDACTED] Maua Flowers, Lissette Cheng, Lidell Jackson—and members of all the various organizations within The Lesbian and Gay

People Of Color Steering Committee.

The collective sharing of all our histories was especially emotionally powerful and motivating. Such extraordinarily moving occasions as these—opportunities to learn about each other, and sensitize ourselves to each other's needs and issues—make for important moments in our lives. And it was

apparent that everyone in the room felt this same sense of importance. Clearly we need more events like this!

We in Colorlife, co-sponsors of the event with The Lesbian and Gay People Of Color Steering Committee, thank everyone for coming!

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will be the order of the day, and The Board of Education program hardly is aimed at "deluging African American first-graders with the literature of homosexuality." And by no means does it seek to usurp the right and authority of parents to have influence and control over their children's education; indeed, a large part of the challenge in implementing the program is just how to accommodate the concerns of parents over a wide range of educational materials that will be used in the program. But Jenkins' choice of language, particularly with regard to homosexuality, hints at an unaddressed problem we have been unwilling to confront in the Black community: pervasive, unbridled, homophobia.

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role model for all of us. One way is to look at how she continues to remain faithful to the cultural traditions of her People, while at the same time she speaks another language and moves people to action; she belongs to a long list of international organizations and grass-roots groups, and her work has become a symbol for peace; and she travels the world over, in exile from her own land, unarmed, yet she is the strongest Indigenous woman in the world today.

Books: *I... Rigoberta Menchú* Edited by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray Verso Editions, London ISBN 086091 788 6 U.S. order code 7191 0

You Can't Drown The Fire Latin American Women Writing in Exile Edited by Alicia Partnoy Cleis Press 1988

With reasoning that can be described only as opaque, Jenkins presents a view that, unfortunately, meets with far too much approbation within the Black community: that homosexuality is not to be "tolerated" (because, after all, it is a "lifestyle," not a life, that is "bizarre") and that it is a state of being generally associated with corrupted, degenerated white folks.

Those holding such a view are not the frothing lunatics one would imagine, but well-educated, sensible, rational, decent people like Jenkins, who simply cannot see, or will not accept, the ignominy of their own intellectual stance: At the same time they advocate for human rights and "a common humanity," they construe homosexuals as unqualified in both categories; at the same time they denounce white racism, they embrace, even encourage, Black homophobia;

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"Meditations on the Rainbow": Look what we found under all that linoleum!

In fact, most of the criticism of the project after the August 12 meeting centered around the ignorance of museum-types who are removed from the lesbian & gay people who call ourselves a community. The museum types end up with mementos from the Daughters of Bilitis or the Mattachine Society, and don't consult the people who have been documenting gay and lesbian history the longest. The institution that is nationally known for documenting our community from a grass-roots level since 1974, The Lesbian Herstory Archives, (LHA) was not initially invited to participate, and neither was the Center Library and Archives, established in 1990, yet the project naturally expected to borrow from them substantially.

People of Color not only question the accessibility of our history once it is collected by these institutions, but if we have been called to help make the exhibits more representative of our diverse community, whose call has it been? I think it is important to make a distinction between what the LHA means to lesbians of color and

at the same time they argue for inclusion in a curriculum because it is "morally correct," they yield to the morally incorrect concession that the exclusion of others is all right.

Coming from the legacy of pain, ostracism and suffering we have endured as a people simply because of who and what we are, it should revile us that we have in our community an intellectual orientation, such as Jenkins', that is both pervasive and extremely objectionable. Surely we are able to confront this demon and, with understanding and enlightenment, kill it. Standing on soapboxes and issuing preachments about the evils of homosexuality may win quick points for some, but we do ourselves, as a community, a grave injustice when we adopt and continue the hateful traditions of the larger society.

the way other entities have approached us when they want our participation.

When ALOEC (Asian Lesbians of the East Coast) was formed in 1983, co-founder June Chan went to the LHA to look for information on Asian lesbians. "It's not that the Archives had a lot of material to offer us," said Chan, "but what they had they made available to us, they helped us connect with other Asian lesbians, and they asked us to donate the information we had for their archives." "The Archives was very supportive of this project," wrote Juanita Ramos, who began her research on Latina lesbians in 1980. Today, *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians*, published in 1987, has a place on LHA shelves.

When writers, academics, button collectors, photographers, etc., from People of Color (POC) communities are asked to contribute, so that the exhibit will reflect our existence and participation, we are asked to give a great deal of energy and resources to a project that comes out of an external agenda. There is also the logical, if never open implication, that if POCs don't participate in this project, the project will go on as scheduled. It will still represent white people, mostly men—doesn't that

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mean that white men control the project?

Do we want to participate in order to stem the criticism that POCs refused to participate, therefore how could the project be expected to be representative? Do we want to compromise our already taxed resources to work on an agenda that we didn't set? Are we to feel guilty for not thinking of it? If African-American lesbians and gay men, Native Two Spirits, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latinas and Latinos who are lesbian or gay, are just beginning to document ourselves, it is obvious that we don't have control of the resources or input into the agenda. Clearly, this sets up a very uneven relationship, and if we feel condescended to when these folks ask us to participate, we are. Besides, exhibits of this nature are not supposed to be accessible community projects with popular participation. Museums have paid professionals to do all this work, so how come we're supposed to pitch in and represent ourselves in the exhibit with our contributions—for free?

Filmmaker and poet Frances Negr_n Muntaner, one of the invited panelists for the September 11-12 Stonewall History Project planning conference, thinks we should stay with the effort. "Museum curators like it quiet, they don't want all this noise and community involvement," she says. "And the more involvement there is, the noisier it's gonna get. But if we participate, and they fuck up, and the exhibit doesn't represent us in the end, we can leave it for the record that they fucked up." That's just it, many of us will say, when did we ever get our words on the record? Can we trust that "history" will reveal what actually happened here?

Looking at it from the Lesbian Herstory Archives point of view, Polly Thistlethwaite expresses not only anger at the presumptions of the project organizers in terms of making use of LHA materials, yet not inviting them as an equal partner, but also great concern about the responsibility that LHA would be expected to shoulder. "At the August 12 meeting, people in the community wanted us

to participate, to fill in the void for lesbians and People of Color," recounted Thistlethwaite. "But if we failed people's expectations, how could we be responsible for an entire project that we did not conceive?" There again is the point about who sets the agenda.

Lesbian & gay People of Color have been rushing to legitimize the agendas of white activists for years, as lesbians have been sought out in times of crisis to balance the agendas of white gay men. A perfect example of how the pattern continues, was the early 1991 planning to hold a third March on Washington for lesbian and gay rights in 1992. The date was Columbus weekend, of course. Representatives from POC organizations, among them George Bellinger, Jr. and Curtis Harris, pointed out that the 500th Anniversary of Resistance and Survival would not only be inappropriate for such a march, it would seriously compromise the ability of People of Color to participate, and would be clearly divisive since white lesbians and gay men would be steered away from supporting People of Color.

As it turned out, the march planning committee eventually heard us and rescheduled the march for Spring 1993 (but not before a lot of discussion went on about how this was an "election year," and so forth. Sadly, it is this very same government, responsible for slavery, genocide and breaches of land treaties that People of Color did not want to focus on, in October 1992.) An attempt that was not successful, however, was the viewing of the Quilt this past October 12 in Washington D.C. Quilt organizers ignored early written requests by Native Two Spirits, as well as the decision reversal of the march organizers, and followed through with their plans for an October viewing of the Quilt.

Now, as different lesbian, gay and bisexual People of Color are approached and asked for help with this project, perhaps to be a bridge to our particular communities, let's get back to the question of money and resources—how many years did it take the LHA to finally get a building

(and let Joan have a home with normal-sized bookshelves)? It would certainly be reasonable to request paid lesbian staff (of all colors) to catalog and restore priceless lesbian memorabilia. And the Center Archives could probably use some museum quality glass cases or even an elevator. But is this the way to get it?

To date, some lesbians and gay men of color are already part of advisory committees for the Stonewall History Project, and others will undoubtedly contribute as time goes on. Besides making sure that we are all aware how this project has come down, there are certain questions we need to ask ourselves and each other about the role of our community organizations with regard to the Stonewall History Project.

Should we become advisors to the advisors and open up our resources? Do we have a responsibility to respond collectively, each lesbian & gay organization of people of color trying to represent lesbian & gay people of color of its own ethnicity, no matter what other pressing issues may be on its agenda at the moment?

This is a very large problem. The SHP is just one small aspect of it. It shows symptoms of the same imbalance of power that affects every other facet of our lives here in the city. We can make attempts, but we cannot correct the epidemic imbalances that exist here. First of all, the four historical institutions involved are hardly likely to pass a workforce utilization analysis for compliance with local EEO requirements. But that's not what we have to accomplish here.

There are already three of four individuals who are persons of color who are participating in a advisory or contributory capacity, and hopefully, there will be others. Ultimately, these individuals should not be expected to "bring in" the contributions of "their" communities, nor should their presence exempt the SHP from being inclusive. White members of the advisory committee are assumed to work on the lesbian and gay community as a whole; when they are identified by their peers as a valuable

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community as a whole; when they are identified by their peers as a valuable resource it is because of their scholarship, not because of their opportune connection to certain ethnic groups.

The problem with this pattern is that the bases are first covered by white scholars or activists depending on the area of study, reputation, or personal connections to other people in the field. Then, the call goes out to fill the remaining slots with lesbians, and then People of Color.

Now, People of Color are not a single-faceted population; our working in solidarity is a political necessity, but it is sometimes used by white organizations as a political expedient. Recruiting one representative of each major cultural category who is remotely related with the matter at hand does not cut it. This is not a balanced meal and populations are not the same as food groups. Getting POCs on the advisory committee of the SHP should not mean that they should have the double burden of scholarship and outreach!

The solution, if there is a single one, is probably one that will not come soon, nor will it come easily because it must affect structure. Even the most accessible of historical institutions—the LHA for example, or The Center Archives, does not always go out into the community and document the development of specific groups of lesbians and gay men. These institutions depend largely on community participation and contribution to their projects.

People generally don't—in the middle of their political development—contribute materials about themselves and their organizations for some documentation effort unless they feel some kind of ownership of this project. The ownership of a group of people over an institution involves commitment, responsiveness, accessibility, and availability of resources. Most importantly, there must be mutual identification.

If this basic identification does not exist between the SHP and the

larger community which includes all lesbian, gay, two-spirited, bisexual & transgender people, then the only individuals who will be actively participating will be those for whom the environment is a comfortable one to work, and that will be a minority.

The end product will represent this minority participation and there is nothing that the coordinating body of the SHP can do to alter this perception. There is nothing that activists and organizers can do either. The final result must reveal the uneven distribution of power that exists at this point in our history.

I am not saying that people need to give up, but rather to recognize that this is our starting point. Ultimately, I find that I agree with Negrón Mutaner in that those who are interested should stay with the effort and be encouraged to make a valuable contribution.

But participation in this and other such projects need not take precedence over grass-roots projects. We are all writing our own histories now, and whatever the collective story tells in the end it should certainly all our words, and hopefully prevent another 500 years of ignorance.

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In "Moth Dreams" we are given urban characters suggested by bits of costumery, like a bicycle helmet, a fox stole. These are uncooperative people moved by funky city rhythms and holding bad attitudes. Fagan also has gay males characterized on the stage, acknowledging that presence flavoring the cityscape.

Both "Prelude" and "Excerpts from Griot New York" show Fagan to be more free from sexist assumptions and role assignments than most choreographers. Fagan doesn't femme the women in his company. First of all, they are too physically developed and strong to be relegated to having some man be the crane that lifts them, faint and fluttery, all over the stage. Their movements are just as acrobatic and demanding as the

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men, yet Fagan is not unaware that a bare-chested woman has a different affect on an audience than a bare-chested man.

In the "Spring Yaounde" excerpt from "Griot New York," a woman dressed in only her underpants is paired with a man wearing only his, but this nudity is not played for sensation. In fact, this display of blatant heterosexuality was not offensive. The couple didn't kiss, but touched faces tastefully, depicting more intimacy and closeness than any soul kissing I've ever seen.

To add insult to injury,
they profit by making
it a commercial
venture