

The Myth of the C

"The Myth of the Common Denominator"

By John Kyper

When I learned last June that Miami voters had overwhelmingly rejected a gay rights ordinance, my reaction was simple: we'll fight. That night the anger was contagious. Boston Advocates for Human Rights collected \$200 in 20 minutes from patrons of Sporters bar. In New York and in San Francisco thousands staged impromptu marches, and demonstrators in Norfolk, Virginia, caused Anita Bryant to break into tears when they walked out on her prayer at a religious crusade.

We have come to realize, once again, that our lives were on the line. Two weeks after the Florida vote, four young thugs in San Francisco attacked Robert Hillsborough and stabbed him to death, as one of them shouted, "Here's one for Anita." I don't think I had felt so electrified since Nixon's mining of Haiphong harbor, or his terror bombing of Bach Mai hospital. My outrage had overcome my exhaustion, and I was involved—again—because I had no other choice.

The anger and the determination remain, but not the illusion of Gay Unity which some of us had nursed through this period. A Boston benefit held several weeks before the Miami election was actually entitled, "Thank you, Anita Bryant, for getting us together." John Mitzel criticized this kind of logic with the appropriate rebuttal: "We must not kiss the boot that's aiming to smash us in the face."

The truth, of course, is that Bryant did *not* get us together, however great a service she may have performed in shocking people out of their complacency. But the contradictions and divisions within the gay male and lesbian communities persist. All of the nice words in the world could not transform a fraudulent "unity" into a political fact; the power of such

And so our imagination and creativity were discarded, and the Dade County Coalition tried to sell our rights to Miami voters in a slick public relations campaign coordinated by outsiders brought into Miami. We were requested to remain invisible, lest we antagonize the electorate. Bryant's hysteria campaign, focusing upon selected biblical injunctions and the old red herring of child-molestation, was hardly so circumspect. With the same certitude that he has denounced gay activists as "neurotic to the point of megalomania," Goodstein declared in one of his editorials that a victory in Miami would put us forward five years—and a defeat would set us back five years. No wonder it all failed so miserably!



photo by Alden Smith

and blasphemy that had been committed in the name of a sacred symbol. Indeed, the only flag-burning I ever witnessed was committed by a drunken veteran, haunted out of his mind by the memory of the barbarities he had performed as a paratrooper in Vietnam. Such polarizing actions do have the virtue of making a few people think—even if the majority will continue to swear by the old shibboleths.

Andrea Dworkin's column touched an even more sensitive nerve, how gay men and lesbians relate in their uneasy coalition together. I didn't like her accusations any more than I like being blamed for all the crimes of racism because I am white. I didn't need to wallow in bourgeois guilt games. Real guilt is paralyzing enough. Her friend John Stoltenberg used to write about the "unnaturalness" of erections, and Kenneth Pitchford's Effeminit collective once published a "Gay Enemy" list, of men who didn't share their version of Correct Politics. But I needed to know the origins of Dworkin's rage, because I recognize I am a creature of a sexist system (however unwillingly), programmed from birth to be a Man. I did not need to agree with her to realize some truth in what she had written, and to take responsibility for it.

What impressed me was the number of men, judging from the letters to GCN, who felt personally threatened by her invective. They seemed unable merely to disagree, but had to label her "Victorian" and even "homophobic" (a lesbian!). One asked, rhetorically, if he should commit suicide.

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game-playing in lieu of compassion toward each other, or to the sufferings of other people. (Issues like gay racism and gay classism are overshadowed. Indeed, those blacks and Marxists who insist that gays and women don't know *real* oppression seem a mirror image of our own ideologues.) One letter writer culminated her bombastic put-down of a male critic of Dworkin's with the parting shot: "Remember feminism is the *final* revolution." The polemics are thoroughly predicable, and predictably, they go nowhere.

Sexism is not a simple-minded dualism with one side "right" and the other side "wrong" (reflecting the either/or mentality of our society); it is a *system* that channels us from birth into pre-ordained roles, stunting the humanity of us all. George Whitmore said it best when he remarked that we are vomiting chunks of our oppression all over each other. The sad truth is that it is far, far easier to go after each other than to deal with a society that is thoroughly sexist and homophobic. The frustration makes us easier targets for recriminations, demoralizing ourselves and perpetuating the cycle of our oppression. God knows, we're weak enough without scapegoating and doing The Man's dirty work for him.



service she may have performed in shocking people out of their complacency. But the contradictions and divisions within the gay male and lesbian communities persist. All of the nice words in the world could not transform a fraudulent "unity" into a political fact; the power of such positive thinking is self-delusion.

Almost from the beginning of the Miami struggle, the possibility of an effective orange juice boycott, one of our best tactics, was squandered in internal bickering over whether we would be accused of trying to wreck the Florida citrus industry, and of "persecuting" a woman who is worth more money than the vast majority of us will ever see in a lifetime. Misplaced concern for a "respectable" image played into Bryant's cynical martyr complex before the mass media: witness the recent apology by the National Gay Task Force after she had fled New York City, alleging that "militant homosexuals" had made "death threats" against her.

Several months before Miami, Earl Butz had been forced to resign as Secretary of Agriculture after he had been quoted making a racist joke. I don't recall any dissension among blacks, or much compassion from the likes of the *New York Times* or *Time* magazine toward his civil right to be a bigot. It was not acceptable.

One must wonder whether the millionaires who financed the Dade County Coalition, publisher David Goodstein of the *Advocate* and Jack Campbell of the Club Bath Chain, valued the abstraction of "free enterprise" more highly than the matter of our dignity and self-respect in the face of Bryant's lies. Instead of self-respect, such "leaders" exploited misogyny and even self-hatred. Recall Campbell's lapel pin, "Dear Anita—Cram It," or the popularity of "Anita Sucks Oranges" tee shirts. More commonplace, how many, many times have I heard gay men call her a "bitch"?

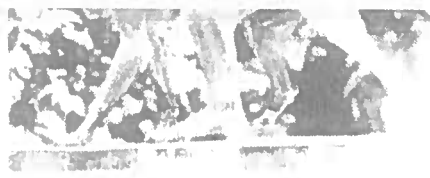


photo by Alden Smith

Mercifully, the unreality could not last for long. Gay Pride Week, at the end of June, produced much unexpected enlightenment, and a lot of vituperation. Charley Shively burned his Bible at Boston's Gay Pride rally (to shrieks of "Burn in Hell!"), and GCN published a bombastic column by Andrea Dworkin that accused gay men of sexism and misogyny. Both were debated ferociously for weeks.

They were not without their contradictions: Charley, guiding spirit of *Fag Rag*, is an avowed anarchist who teaches at a state college and has testified several times before the Massachusetts Legislature on behalf of gay bills. Dworkin's sweeping invective ("... The male gay movement is unreservedly antifeminist, ruthlessly contemptuous of women, and unashamed in its advocacy of sexual brutality as the essence of masculinity.") reads like a parody of the anger that she had plumbed so eloquently in her books *Women Hating* and *Our Blood*. But both could have been anticipated by anyone familiar with their writings.

Atheism has never seemed any more viable for me than Christianity, and I didn't feel moved either to applaud or condemn Charley's action. (The one cogent criticism, that it would alienate support for the gay bills then being considered in the Legislature, became somewhat academic. Seemingly, it had little effect upon the eventual defeat of the civil service antidiscrimination bill in October.) The controversy reminded me of all the fuss surrounding the occasional flag-burnings at antiwar rallies a decade ago, complete with sensational footage for the six o'clock news. Once again, critics seemed oblivious to the much greater obscenity

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Allen Young attempted to explain the bases of Dworkin's anger and disappointment toward gay men, to be branded "sycophantic" by Wayne Dynes in a column that was a signal work of intellectual masturbation, seeking to dismiss feminists and lesbians as a group by smearing them with the anti-male sentiments of a vocal minority. In a response to the one letter by a gay male that might genuinely be called sycophantic, a defender of Dynes unwittingly revealed his own patronizing assessment of women: "For years we (gay males) indulged lesbians with unwarranted priorities, supportive propaganda and wishful thinking, all in hopes of gaining their increased participation and a reasonable unity." He reminded me of a white liberal, disappointed that blacks would want to form their own movement without him.

Some editorials by the publisher of *Esplanade* would have us believe that lesbians are the chief oppressors of gay men. Those of us who see feminism as more than "women's issues," as affecting *our* lives, he once termed "faggo feminists." (I was flattered. Like the lesbians who proudly adopted Betty Fredan's slur "lavender menace," we should take the epithet as our own.) This reaction, like Dynes's, reminds me of the racists of the old South, and in some neighborhoods of Boston, who reserve their worst contempt for whites whom they perceive to be "nigger lovers."

Perhaps Dworkin, Dynes, et al. deserved each other. It doesn't do us much good to debate whether gay men or lesbians are the "most oppressed" — such an endless, circular argument reminds me of the more-radical-than-thou power trips I witnessed in the New Left during the late 1960s, and in the early days of Boston's Gay Liberation Front. It's a recurring nightmare, one more variation of selfish, authoritarian



photo by Bettye Lane

We would do ourselves a great service to stop pretending that there is one unified gay movement, of both men and women. There never was and there never will be. We should be honest with ourselves and recognize that we are a *coalition*, with intertwined — but not congruent — goals and priorities. It seems we cannot live with each other, but it is just as certain that we cannot live *without* each other, especially with the repression that's been coming down against our communities. We should stop playing games.

Repression, of course, has been with us for longer than any of us can remember. Joseph McCarthy's crusade against the "Communist homosexuals" in the State Department had its antecedents in the medieval inquisitions that judged witches, heretics and homosexuals alike as threats to church and state, and executed them. In the late 1940s the lesbian journal *Vice Versa* had to be circulated clandestinely. It was a decade before the U.S. Supreme Court would finally allow *One*, an early homophile publication, the right to use the mails (one of the lesser-known decisions by the controversial "Warren Court"). And the now-

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mythologized Christopher Street revolt was against a police raid of the kind that had been commonplace for decades.

The first police reaction to Christopher Street was shock: "This time the sissies fought back," one of them said. But we can be certain that it was an automatic, immediate decision to place this new militancy under surveillance. We graduated, so to speak, from the Vice Squad to the Red Squad. In 1971 one member of Boston's Gay Male Liberation was briefly jailed during a grand jury "fishing expedition" into the Mayday Collective. Several years later the FBI was using Patricia Hearst's kidnapping, then Susan Saxe and Katherine Ann Power, as occasions to pry into feminist and lesbian communities about the country. Eight people were jailed for refusing to talk to grand juries in Connecticut and Kentucky.

With the development of gay liberation, the tired old myth of the "homosexual child molester" has been embellished into a conspiracy to subvert the youth of America. Anita Bryant is merely the latest and most successful of the demagogues who have fashioned an ideology reminiscent of the would-you-want-your-daughter-to-marry-one argument of racists — only here the Patriarchy, perhaps remembering its own most suppressed desires, is more concerned for its *sons*. Lesbians are challenged as "unfit mothers."

Thus black men in the South were lynched or sent to the electric chair for the real or imagined rape of white women, and in Russia Jews endured repeated pogroms whipped up by rumors after the deaths of Gentile children. Gay men are attacked by thugs attempting to prove their threatened masculinity, while the KKK calls

repeated everything that the authorities fed it, including erroneous charges and the home addresses of the accused. (So much for the Good Liberals of the *Globe*, who have yet to admit publicly that they erred.) There is no discussion of the political motives or intense Puritanism of DA Garrett Byrne, an 81-year-old bachelor. (Some people in Revere accuse him of a vendetta against the county's second city. In 1970 Byrne had the musical *Hair* temporarily banned in Boston, and four years later he engineered the indictment of Dr. Kenneth Edelin for manslaughter while performing an abortion.)

I was suspicious from the moment I read of the indictments. Hysteria was



clearly in the air, reminding me of *The Boys of Boise*. I had also read Jonathan Katz's interview with one of the dozen men who were railroaded into prison during that mid-1950s witch-

would be so grateful to the first lesbian legislator that we would not concern ourselves with her record on other issues, like rent control or redlining. She gambled by supporting the House leadership in hopes of winning votes for the gay bills — and lost. Her supporters insulted us by responding to criticisms of her as if they were attacks on gay liberation. Now she's interested in running for the U.S. Senate. Good luck.

I felt personally threatened by the hysteria surrounding the indictments, and I joined in Boston/Boise's suit against the hotline. I live with small children. I have worked as a daycamp counselor. Five years ago I was refused a job at a local state hospital because

of my homosexuality, told I was "not suitable to work with young people." I've never been quite the same since that incident. Out of my humiliation and anger came a determination that I was

ployee, our few gains are not safe.

It is sometimes hard to believe we have made any progress at all. Blacks and women have more of a sense of struggle because they've been at it longer. Our resistance to oppression, historically a sporadic and short-lived phenomenon, began to grow in an organized fashion only thirty years ago. When I came out a few months after Christopher Street, there were three gay and lesbian groups in Boston (only the Daughters of Bilitis survives), and we were ignored by the mass media. It was a big event when the *Globe* finally discovered our existence — over a year later. To be taken seriously enough to become an object of an election was unthinkable.

The Right Wing attack against us is part of a drive against a wide array of scapegoats for the traumas of the last decade and a half: liberal do-gooders, blacks, Puerto Ricans, militant women and homosexuals, welfare recipients, radicals, military deserters. Five years of economic uncertainty have brought home to America that for once it lost a war, that it sacrificed its sons and its wealth in a futile crusade. Well-financed hate merchants are using gay rights, abortion, pornography, the Panama Canal, affirmative action and busing to divert attention from the fact that all of the suffering has benefited only a few wealthy people. We should not forget that a modified version of the repressive Senate Bill One is slowly making its way through Congress.

We are objects of special attack at a time when the family, as constituted in our society, seems destined to rip itself apart by its own contradictions. Many of us are refugees from unhappy families and have grown in our own directions, to show that there are alternatives to the straight-and-narrow expectations that were imposed upon us at

women, and in Russia Jews endured repeated pogroms whipped up by rumors after the deaths of Gentile children. Gay men are attacked by thugs attempting to prove their threatened masculinity, while the KKK calls for our execution. Historically, the perpetrators could usually count on the collaboration of the authorities and get away with murder. In Tucson, Arizona, a judge reduced to manslaughter charges against four local football players who had killed a man outside a gay bar. Although they admitted to harassing gays, the judge cited their "good character" and gave them probation.

Anyone who has been out for the past several years in Boston can recall a number of unsolved murders of gay men. GCN's first big story, in 1973, was the "Arboretum murder," which the Boston *Globe* had buried on an inside page. Only rarely does the media recognize anti-gay violence for what it is, ostensibly for fear of a libel action. It showed no such reticence, however, upon the discovery of "homosexual mass murderer" Dean Corll, in Houston. When we are victims we are condemned to anonymity, and when we are villains we are condemned to notoriety. Two months after Robert Hillsborough's murder, *Time* published an article "The Gay Goons" that ridiculed gay fears of violent backlash after Miami, and cited a poorly-planned gay zap (against a homophobic aide to a mayoral candidate in New York) to insinuate that gays were attacking straights. Similarly, many whites use black violence against whites as a rationalization for the violence of a racist system.

Early in December the Suffolk County District Attorney's office announced indictments against 24 men in an alleged "child porn ring" involving boys in Revere. As usually happens in such situations, the media was taken in by the sensationalism and

clearly in the air, reminding me of *The Boys of Boise*. I had also read Jonathan Katz's interview with one of the dozen men who were railroaded into prison during that mid-1950s witch-hunt. So had many others. The Boston/Boise Committee was formed as a response and quickly began to pick apart the tissue of lies and half-truths emanating from the DA's office. We learned that these "children" are actually adolescents and that some of them are gay. We got an assistant DA to admit that seven of the defendants had no connection whatever to the "ring."

The indictments were successful, however, in dividing the gay community. A friend told me, "I hope they crucify those men;" and two gays had letters in the *Globe* expressing "revulsion and disgust at the news of the Revere 'sex ring.'" In a television interview Rep. Elaine Noble called on us to "support the efforts of the [District Attorney] in unraveling this contemptuous situation," several days after the DA had established a hotline for people to report suspected cases of boys being molested. She has not retracted her statement.

Such extreme defensiveness seems motivated by the desperate desire to be considered "normal" by the standards of a society that judges us sick to begin with, to fit in at any cost to our integrity and good sense. Behind that is a goodly measure of self-hatred. I am most appalled by Noble's behavior, but I am hardly surprised by her opportunism. Now she is midway through her second term in the State House and is about to lose her seat in redistricting. Her effectiveness and her abrasiveness have been the subject of bitter debate in the gay community, witness to the steady erosion of the constituency that first elected her. Evidently she thought we would be concerned with one issue alone; we

of my homosexuality, told I was "not suitable to work with young people." I've never been quite the same since that incident. Out of my humiliation and anger came a determination that I was not going to collaborate with my oppression.

We *must* fight back because our enemies are sure to take advantage of any weakness or division on our part. I can remember an incident eight years ago, when birth control advocate Bill Baird discovered a gay prisoner who had been held in Charles Street Jail without trial for two years. The matter was mentioned at a meeting of a local gay group, and one member shouted that he didn't want *his* organization associated with the case because he'd been arrested with a "child" of 16. The prisoner's name, I later learned, was Edward Rastellini, and he was stabbed to death in 1973 at Bridgewater State Hospital while serving 15 years for sexual acts that nearly all gay men have performed, what the *Massachusetts General Laws* terms "the abominable and detestable crime against nature," sodomy.

We cannot defend ourselves by running away. If all we want to do is get a few laws passed, we should ask ourselves if it's worth the energy. I am in fact covered by an anti-discrimination order, as an employee of the city of Boston (so much for David Goodstein's attack on us "unkempt, unemployable" gay activists). Yet Mayor Kevin White issued his executive order in virtual secrecy, overshadowed during a period of racial violence, and almost nobody knows about it. I certainly don't feel any more secure, at a time when the Supreme Court refuses to hear the appeal of a public school teacher fired solely for his homosexuality. As long as there is the possibility of some homophobic supervisor deciding to challenge the Mayor's order by dismissing a homosexual em-

our society, seems destined to rip itself apart by its own contradictions. Many of us are refugees from unhappy families and have grown in our own directions, to show that there are alternatives to the straight-and-narrow expectations that were imposed upon us at birth. Any alternative is threatening to those who are too repressed to believe they could live any differently. And after a lifetime invested in a social convention, the possibility that their children might want to be more than mere extensions of their lives may be too terrifying to contemplate because it is seen as a repudiation. Bob Dylan sketched this anxiety in the early 1960s: "Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command."



photo by Bettye Lane

We must seek allies wherever we can find them, especially among other oppressed groups. We must counter hysteria and bigotry with the force of the truth we have lived in our lives. The enduring potency of the "recruitment" myth is traceable to the mysterious fascination that homosexuality holds to those who know little about it. The process of coming out, how an individual realizes his/her homosexuality, is the least understood aspect of gay life. Ignorance encourages people to view the homosexual community as a sinister "fraternity," which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy by the ostracism and persecution that such an attitude encourages. Our work is in front of us.