

# UNLEARNING RACISM

*New attempts to understand old attitudes*

by Dennis Peterson

Alienation is what I feel standing on the outside lookin' in leaning towards anarchy and approval. It's true I've lost my identity but I swear it was stolen from me and that's no reason for you to try and define me. I don't symbol a goddamn thing and I learned to sing, I sing about alienation.

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Naomi Littlebear is a Chicana poet and songwriter in our community. I spoke with her recently as part of a series of interviews on racism in the gay community. Racism is not much different with us than with the larger Portland community, although there are reasons to hope that it would be. It is my hope that in spotlighting what we need to do within the smaller context, the points raised will strike closer to home and give us all something to work on.

"I came out in Orange County, California," Naomi began, "and was around the OC women's community and the LA women's community about ten years ago. These same women I was coming out with had been in high school calling Mexicans greasers, spics, beaners, and bull riders. They were all brought up with a very intense dislike. It was still reflected in the way that they mistreated me. Racism is more blatant in California because there is a very large Chicano population there. Because there is such a small number of Spanish-speaking people in Portland, people are not used to having their racism tested. The attitudes are there and the predisposition to having a racist response, because everyone is taught to think a certain way and react a certain way to non-white people. I think it's subtle and repressed here. In southern California it was pretty blatant, and I experienced it in ways that weren't very pleasant. There was a lot of off-handed anger, looking-down, not being brought into the circles, and condescending energy."

"I was playing music with a woman there. The women in the community would go up to her and tell her how great she was, but they would never come up to me. They also thought I was a bad influence on her. It was never explained; there were no tangible reasons; I didn't turn her into a drug addict or anything. I think a lot of people traditionally look at the dark-haired, dark-skinned woman

as the villain, and if she dares to relate with a white woman she is no doubt going to corrupt her in one way or another."

"When I first came out there wasn't a lot of political consciousness around the issue of racism. Women were focusing on raising their consciousness about sexism. Racism wasn't talked about or thought about back then. Racism is always there, the question is whether it's a topic of conversation or not, whether it's something people want to look at inside themselves and want to change. When I got to Portland I was in the middle of consciousness-raising around issues of race and class within a certain segment of the gay community, and that seems to have dwindled down. It's not an issue anymore. I think there are concerned people who make an effort to change, but the majority of people can't be bothered. Now that there are other causes to take up, why bother with this one? The point is I have to bother with it every day."

"I also became an object of sexual curiosity, but it was mixed with distrust. They wondered what it would be like to go to bed with me. A woman who was involved with me also got involved with another dark-skinned woman and said, 'Well gosh, I've got two women of color now. It's like being put into a collection. She felt that if she got involved with me no one would call her a racist. At that time it was popular to be politically correct. I felt like there wasn't a lot of honesty with people who wanted to get to know me as a woman whose background was different and should be respected. There was always a catch."

Racial differences can exert an influence on a relationship from within and without. I spoke with Rupert Kinnard, a Black man who had a White lover for four years. "If a Black man and a White man are together some people will think that the White man is 'into' Black men. That's a certain manifestation of racism. I would hope that the relationship happened because of the quality of their personalities. That is not to say that I don't want my Blackness to be seen. I am not a part of the melting pot; I want it to be seen and appreciated. There are benefits that can be derived from different cultures getting together." Jim Gambrell, his ex-lover agrees. "I grew up in Alabama. My mother used to be more racist than she is now, and my father is out-and-out racist. My hometown was fifty percent Black, yet I only knew the two people that worked for us. I wanted to help Black

people with their oppression, but I was scared to draw attention to myself because people would find out that I was gay. Rupert was the first gay person I got to know when I came to Portland. I've learned to speak out against racism when I encounter it, through Rupert and his friends."

"The first step in solving a problem is to realize that there is a problem. (Bertrand Russell.)

Naomi says, "I have only been able to have conversations about racism and its effect here in Portland. I wouldn't have been able to have had such conversations with women in LA at the time I was there, because they were

very defensive; they would prefer to think it was something that happened in the South with Black people. There was a great deal of denial there and anger if you broached the subject." People try to dismiss it by saying, "Basically we're all just people and we live on

