

I live in an alien skin

Few white gays and lesbians know how to accept and connect with more than the gay part of me

by Scot Nakagawa

As a teenager, I went through a period when I spent an incredible amount of time staring at pictures of freaks, and thinking about what it would be like to know them. I had dozens of friends with whom I shared the common experience of racism and poverty, of youth, the juvenile justice system, sex, stolen car rides, and outrageous highs. I lived for those friends. But the freaks I saw in the picture books were special. I connected with them on another level entirely. For me, they were right up there with Che Guevara, Liliuokalani, Marcus Garvey, Wilt Chamberlain, and Cesar Chavez. Something about them drew me in and gave shape to an unacknowledged part of me. They made me feel real. Now I find myself on the other side, with a community of eyes bearing down on me. I wonder, what would I have had the half-girl, the elephant man, and the two-headed monster say to me if they could have inserted themselves whole into the text that surrounded their pictures?

How are we different?

I live in alien skin. I acknowledge every day how inescapable the reality of racism is and how profoundly it affects my life. I come from Hawaii. The people of my community have suffered colonization—cultural, political, and psychological devastation. Our nation has been turned into a combination resort and military reservation. We have been robbed of our land, our language, our self-determination and national sovereignty. I grew up in a community of peers who lived for the day, never sure of a tomorrow. One in five men go to jail—half live on public assistance. We try to place ourselves in the world by looking for people who wear our faces and see them homeless, wearing army uniforms, in the obituaries, on welfare lines, in public housing, suffering from alcoholism, drug addiction, poverty. We see them making their living by sewing leis, posing in grass skirts, cleaning hotel rooms, dancing and fucking. Syphilis, gonorrhea, chicken pox, and measles have been killing us for generations. By the time my first friend died of AIDS, I thought I was all cried out. I was wrong.

In the face of all of this, we created and recreated our cultural lives over and over again. We knew how to have fun like only those who believe they have no future can.

Dealing with homophobia in my home community was no more or less difficult than in the white community. The only difference is that Pacific Island gay men and lesbians lack resources in a community already politically and economically devastated by racism. Making the demand for access and inclusion there requires a different approach. You do not yell at the only people who have provided you shelter while they are selling foodstamps to pay the rent.

Being a person of color in the lesbian and gay community of Portland is something altogether different. Here, the organized and gay identified community is dominated by whites. I live and play and organize among white gay and lesbian people, many of whom would put \$100 ten times over into workshops to learn to say Asian and not Oriental, but would not put five cents into a "straight" Asian or Pacific Islander community effort. I live in alien skin. Few white gays and lesbians know how to accept and connect with more than the gay part of me, which is a tragedy, really. Not so much because of what it means for us as individuals, but because of what it reveals about us politically.

But you do not yell at people who offer you



PHOTO BY LINDA KUEVER

shelter—even when the shelter is only conditional.

How are we alike?

Our individual experiences are vastly different based on where we sit in relationship to each other in the hierarchy of privilege, and power. Race, gender, and sexual orientation are fundamental to the structure of hierarchy in our society. It separates us from one another physically. It imposes an apartheid of the mind and of the spirit upon us in ways which make us tear one another apart. Unity across these barriers is an act of rebellion that could get you killed.

Yet, in spite of the differences white racism places between us there are similarities. The racism which drives white Americans to support war against people of color in Vietnam, the Middle East, and Latin America and which drives a war machine African-Americans must die for more often than any other group, destroys us all. The military industrial complex robs poor whites of needed services, of health care, housing, adequate food, and employment just as surely as it devours poor people of color. Our common need for adequate shelter, food, and health care to remain alive are more real biological determinants of who we are than racial characteristics.

The women's movement and the gay and lesbian liberation movements so often, and justifiably, accused of racism, are confronted with those weaknesses now more than ever as gays and women and people of color find themselves simultaneously under attack by the racist right, while fumbling in our struggle to construct a unified defense. As the right wing strips us of our civil rights, the weaknesses in American-style "democracy" become painfully clear, and gives a renewed sense of urgency to our common need to confront white racism. Lesbians and gay men of color are thrust into double jeopardy. But we are not alone, and what affects us will affect all of society.

What does this mean?

What we can know about each other is limited by the political realities facing us and the way these realities shape the social context within which we live our lives. We can only know each other through change and confront the societal barriers which separate us. To do so requires action. We need a real commitment to make change that goes beyond consciousness raising workshops and reading essays. We need to move beyond the point of looking to acting.

So, this freak show is over. And you still don't know me.

Yearning for inclusiveness

Homophobia and racism go hand in hand

by Lynn R. Nakamoto

We all repeatedly experience a number of indignities in everyday life based on sexual orientation. Add to that the hassles based on sex if you're a lesbian, and for me, add to that the difficulties based on my skin color and racial characteristics. Sometimes it is gratuitous abuse. Just this week, my partner and I were in an elevator in the parking lot next to Pioneer Place in downtown Portland. A heterosexual couple entered the elevator. After we had stepped out, just before the doors closed, the woman yelled out, in a tone that did not demonstrate friendly recognition, "Dykes!" She could have said jap or chink or the like, it happens to me about as often.

Ignoring people of color is only slightly more subtle and yet omnipresent. Take shopping, for instance. I can be the one who is obviously shopping but have salespeople run over to ask my white partner standing next to me if she needs any help. Or, having made eye contact with someone behind the counter after being the first one to approach, have them turn around and say to the nearest white person, "Who's next?" The list is endless.

And then there is television. Just last night, Dec. 12, one of the lines on the sitcom "Wings" referred to a Filipina woman ordered by mail from a catalogue, who didn't work out for the hapless white male character on the show. Of course, that was assumed to be highly incongruous and thus funny.

I don't think it is too trite to note that being lesbian, an Asian, and a woman in the United States is a complex thing that gives me a rich, and sometimes difficult, experience of and perspective on life. I am viewed and treated, however, as if I had separate identities. The incidents above exemplify a part of this.

References like the one on television or the omnipresent objectification for mass appeal as exotica basically define our presence as Asian and Pacific Islander women, then, you must be submissive and appealing to men. Asian and

Pacific Islander lesbians, despite our very real existence, are accordingly invisible.

Unfortunately, this invisibility occurs also in our own cultures and, too often, in the lesbian and gay community. I struggle for my place despite active silencing or studied neglect of my lesbianism from my Japanese American culture, and disregard from other quarters based on my being a woman or Japanese.

I find interesting, however, that people of all stripes tend to be surprised when I say something about their problems with me because they expect that all Asian women are or ought to be meek and submissive. We are not. We are also not monolithic, as even the group label in which we find ourselves, Asians and Pacific Islanders, indicates. I think it is time for us, the lesbian and gay community, to get to know one another, or our social and political endeavors to include everyone will continue to fail.

Everyone in the lesbian and gay community should attempt to get to know, learn from, and trust others who are different from themselves, whether socially or in political organizations. Lesbians and gay men of color have to go through this process of learning about each other as well. It is simply not enough to seek out a person of color to be in an organization to really bring together the diversity of our community. If we don't take the time to discover one another, we will often find ourselves missing cues and getting wrong impressions—the stuff that leads individuals to walk away from participation in the community. Such losses not only demonstrate that we don't really care about or value diversity, but that our community is missing valuable perspectives.

As a lesbian of color, I yearn for inclusiveness. I am encouraged by recent developments in local Asian political organizing. I am also getting to know Asian and Pacific Islander gay men. I am excited about the possibilities after the recent retreat for lesbians of color sponsored by the Lesbian Community Project. I hope to see further efforts in 1992, all my communities can benefit from more people, more views, and more support.

STEPHEN D. YEW,
D.M.D.

A GENTLE APPROACH TO DENTISTRY

Hours: Tuesday - Saturday 8 am-5 pm

700 N. Hayden Island Drive, Suite 330

Phone: 289-1215

FOR

women
BY
women



It's up to you to make your own decisions. If you choose abortion, it's up to us to provide support and respect as well as confidential quality care.

Services include:

Free Walk-in Pregnancy Testing

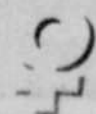
Abortion through 20wks

Birth Control Options (including the Cervical Cap)

Annual Exams

1020 NE 2nd Ave, Suite 200
Holladay Park Prof Bldg
Portland, OR 97232

233-0808



FEMINIST WOMEN'S
HEALTH CENTER

3815 SW Hall Blvd
Beaver Creek Village
Beaverton, OR 97005

646-4204