

VIRTUAL EQUALITY

Urvashi Vaid calls to queers to get real about what homophobia is and how to fight it

by Kristine Chatwood

The presidential election of '92, the story goes, was a watershed moment for the gay and lesbian community. A presidential candidate had actually courted our vote—had not only taken our money but had even shaken our hands. The words “gay” and “lesbian” rolled off Bill Clinton’s tongue with nary a flinch. Why, he and Hillary even had gay friends. Look at David Mixner, perhaps the most famous gay Friend of Bill.

Books

The Clintons met with us publicly; they openly solicited our money; they went on record as wanting our votes. And, so, a grateful community voted, in record numbers, for the Democratic candidate. Finally, we thought, we have been accepted. Our place at the table is assured.

How had a community so long persecuted and vilified come to this place of acceptance and apparent power? And at what price? And did we get what we paid for? In *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*, Urvashi Vaid examines these questions and many others.

Vaid, the former executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, is a progressive activist who has worked in the gay and lesbian movement for more than 15 years. Her perspective, her analysis, comes from the left. Change, not assimilation, is her goal. It is the battle between the forces for change and those aligned

with assimilation that Vaid discusses in her book. Vaid takes the title of her book from the high-technology concept of virtual reality, where “the ‘virtual’ or simulated reality can be made to seem as believable as the ‘real’ experience”; a place where “nothing is real, but we experience it as if it were.”

The reality for lesbians and gay men, in her view, is that after more than half a century of fighting homophobia and heterosexism, we have attained not freedom but “virtual equality.” We may enjoy the “trappings of full equality,” but we are denied the benefits. No amount of celebrity fund-raisers and *Newsweek* cover stories on lesbian chic can change the fact that lesbians and gay men are forced daily to deny who we are and what we do. Discrimination, right-wing opposition and unabated violence face us every day, everywhere.

Vaid argues, and quite persuasively, that while we may have finally won access to the seats of power, we lack the all-important clout. Politicians talk to us, but they don’t listen to us. She believes that the apparent shift in gay influence in politics that occurred from 1972 to 1992 was, in reality, a “transitory pandering to the rich,” and did not reflect a fundamental change in the view of homosexuality held by either the Republicans or the Democrats.

Witness the experience we have had with Clinton. Despite the unprecedented access gay men and lesbians have had to the White House, despite David Mixner’s friendship with Clinton, despite all those campaign promises and meetings

with policy advisors, there is still no national gay and lesbian rights law; there is now an even more insidious policy affecting gay men and lesbians in the military; and Jesse Helms still manages to attach his politics of hate to Senate bill after Senate bill.

Political mainstreaming, according to Vaid, is not working because it does not challenge the “moral and antisexual underpinnings of homophobia....” And that homophobia does not come from our lack of civil rights, she says, it originates in “the nature and construction of the political, legal, economic, sexual, racial and family systems within which we live.” Until we address the social institutions and cultural forces that give rise to homophobia, we cannot eliminate prejudice.

Central to homophobia is gay and lesbian sexuality. It is “the biggest obstacle to our full acceptance as human beings...” Vaid states. “We are hated because of how, with whom and how much (mythic or real) we do it.” The straight world reacts

“as if every act of homosexual sex were an act of terrorism against heterosexuality.” Lesbians and gay men are “threatening because our movement represents the liberation of the most powerful and untamed motivating force in human life: desire.”

And so we become the demons of the radical right, and every act of homosex becomes an act of civil disobedience. Our war is fought not just on the legal and political fronts, but on cultural and sexual fronts as well.

There is little room in Vaid’s world for those espousing a

policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” whether from without or within our community. Our political battle is hampered by our inability to quantifiably deliver the “gay” vote. With so many gay men and lesbians living closeted, secretive lives, there is no way to prove our power at the ballot box. And while it takes money to run a campaign, it takes votes to win one. Until we can definitively deliver the votes, our political influence is limited at best.

Our social and cultural battle cannot be won until we come out of hiding and—day in and day out—challenge the heterosexual world view. Gay men and lesbians are not “just like” everyone else. We never have been and we never will be. In the long run, we are not well served by attempts to disguise and smooth over our differences.

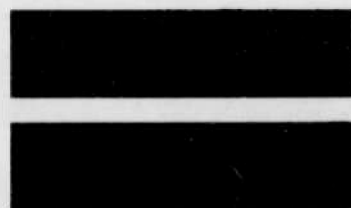
Virtual Equality is not a perfect book. It rambles a bit. Vaid engages in some public breast-beating over what she did and did not do during her years on the political front lines. Seemingly every activist she ever met or heard about gets a mention in the book.

Nonetheless, her political history is well researched. Her presentation of the differences between liberation and mainstreaming is, simply, the best. And, like the true activist she is, Vaid is not content to merely muse and run. She closes her book with a list of projects for anyone who wants to become involved, at any level.

Virtual Equality: the Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation by Urvashi Vaid. Anchor Books, 1995; \$24.95 cloth.

VIRTUAL EQUALITY

THE MAINSTREAMING OF GAY & LESBIAN LIBERATION

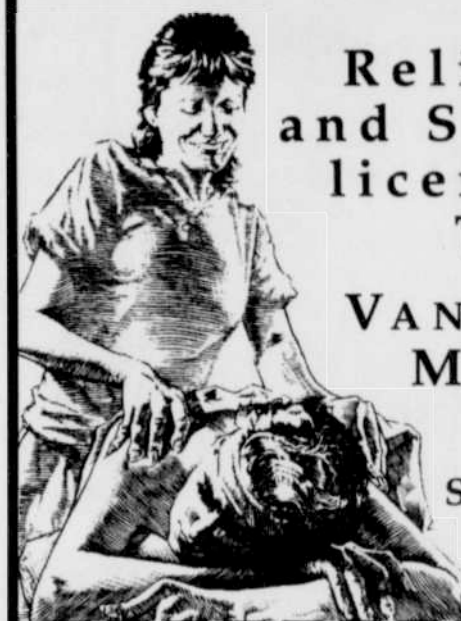


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