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Letters to the editor should be limited to 500 words. **Deadline for submissions** to the editorial department and for the **Calendar** is the Thursday before the first and third Friday for the next issue. Views expressed in letters to the editor, columns and features are not necessarily those of the publisher.

The **display advertising** deadline is the Monday after the first and third Friday for the next issue.

Classified ads must be received at the **just out** office by 3 pm the Monday after the first and third Friday for the next issue, along with payment. Ads will not be taken over the telephone.

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Subscriptions to just out are available for \$17.50 for 12 issues. First Class (in an envelope) is \$30 for 12 issues.

A copy of **just out** is available for \$2. Advertising rates are available on request.

The mailing address and telephone numbers for **just out** are PO Box 14400, Portland, OR 97293-0400; (503) 236-1252. The phone number for the advertising department is 236-1253. Our fax number is 236-1257. Our e-mail address is JustOut2@aol.com.

steppin' out



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

guest editorial Loose lips

Queers have known for ages that whom you kiss and where you do it can make you unpopular, but maybe straights should take a lesson

by Christopher D. Cuttone

It's been said that there is a time and a place for everything—a reasonable assumption, but who decides on matters of decorum, Emily Post or Lon Mabon? Nowadays diversity makes it difficult to formulate even the simplest of rules governing behavior without stepping on someone's toes, and the cult of freedom makes it a crime to step on someone's toes.

Two weeks ago an incident in which a heterosexual couple was ejected from a San Francisco gay bar that had a "no heterosexual kissing" policy gained attention from the national media, raising the specter of so-called reverse discrimination. Witnesses said the pair was really going at it and making a bit of a scene—but that's beside the point, isn't it? The bar's policy singles out a group or class of people for the purposes of limiting and controlling their behavior. That's discrimination, and discrimination is always wrong.

OK, then why in this case does it feel so right? My first reaction to this story was, "Well it's about damn time!"

Even the out-and-proudest queer knows that sometimes it pays to be demure, particularly if one finds oneself in a macho sports bar or stumbles upon a gaggle of skinheads. It may seem like a step back into the closet, but really it's just what everyone the world over does to make getting along a little easier—isn't it?

A Friday-night tour of Portland's gay bars suggests that straight people just don't get it—many have been spoiled by a lifetime of defining the norm and have thus lost the ability to alter their behavior to conform to environmental conditions. One example (without naming names): a trio of abutting bars all serve a primarily gay clientele, but the fabulous dance mix attracts a straight crowd to first one then another, until there are so many male-female pairs grinding away under the disco ball that one can hardly tell it's a queer establishment.

Of course, it is a shame that there are not more clubs playing the wild dance tunes that people obviously want, but that doesn't justify the dislocation of an already marginalized group. When the queer community identifies an unmet need it rallies, lobbies and raises funds to address the issue. When heteros need something, however, they fall back upon the long-standing

dominant-culture tactic of invasion and colonization.

Very often I must explain to straight friends that gay and lesbian bars are special places. For many queers these bars are the only place where they can be themselves completely and without reservation. As such, it is an affront to be in a protected space and be forced to witness the sexual display of a cultural icon—the heterosexual couple—for which every place is a welcoming one and to which every place, be it physically or ideologically, is dedicated.

As a bisexual I have a lot of straight friends and sometimes frequent straight, or at least straight-by-default, establishments. I've even been to such places with a boyfriend in tow, and have been known to play that classic game, "shock the hets." And while my behavior when there with a same-sex partner is not exactly guarded, I certainly do not take off my shirt and do the humpty dance (as I might if I were in a gay bar).

Although I like to provoke (thought, hopefully), I don't enjoy actual fighting, so when tension rises too high or when I perceive a threat to my person because I have been too open in displaying my sexuality, I back down. Conversely, I have seen straight people do the exact opposite in response to a perceived threat: When they enter a gay environment, they get all touchy-feely and step up their sexual display to make sure everyone knows they're just visiting.

Of course I am generalizing; of course not all heterosexuals act this way. The ones who do just stand out more than those who try to get along. Still, it is frustrating to see that they can choose to get along or not—while I am a de facto activist simply because I am different, and while I can never be entirely secure that I will be treated fairly or that I can walk alone at night in safety.

With intolerance lurking around every corner and filibustering at the highest levels of government, queer life is a constant battle between self-expression and self-preservation, a compromise between staying out of the closet and choosing battles that can be won. It may be divisive and counterproductive but, after a lifetime enduring both the insults of bigots and the unconscious, institutionalized prejudice of U.S. society, I guess I thought maybe the hets could use a taste of their own medicine.

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