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BOOKS

Sex and the citizen

An interview with the author of a controversial new book

BY TIM MILLER

At a time when patriotism and other intense feelings have been profoundly stirred, author Shane Phelan has written a book that takes a hard look at the political realities of the gay and lesbian community.

The remarkable, apathy-shaking *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbian and Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Temple University Press, 2001; \$18.95 softcover) asks us to face the question of whether we really can be considered citizens of the United States, a country that excludes us from fundamental markers of citizenship such as marriage and military service. With laserlike clarity and honesty, the book provokes us to peel back the denial and internalized homophobia that keep us in a permanent second-class citizen status in our own nation.

Until recently, Phelan was a political science professor and the women's studies director at University of New Mexico. She is now at the Community of St. John Baptist in New Jersey, being what her novice director calls a "big queer nun." I caught up with her at the Episcopal convent, and we talked sex and citizenship.

Tim Miller: OK, if you read the newspapers you quickly see the United States is bringing up the rear among Western nations regarding lesbian and gay civil rights: the only Western nation to have sodomy laws, the only Western nation to deny gay people the right to serve in the military and so on. Do you think gay people can be considered citizens under such conditions?

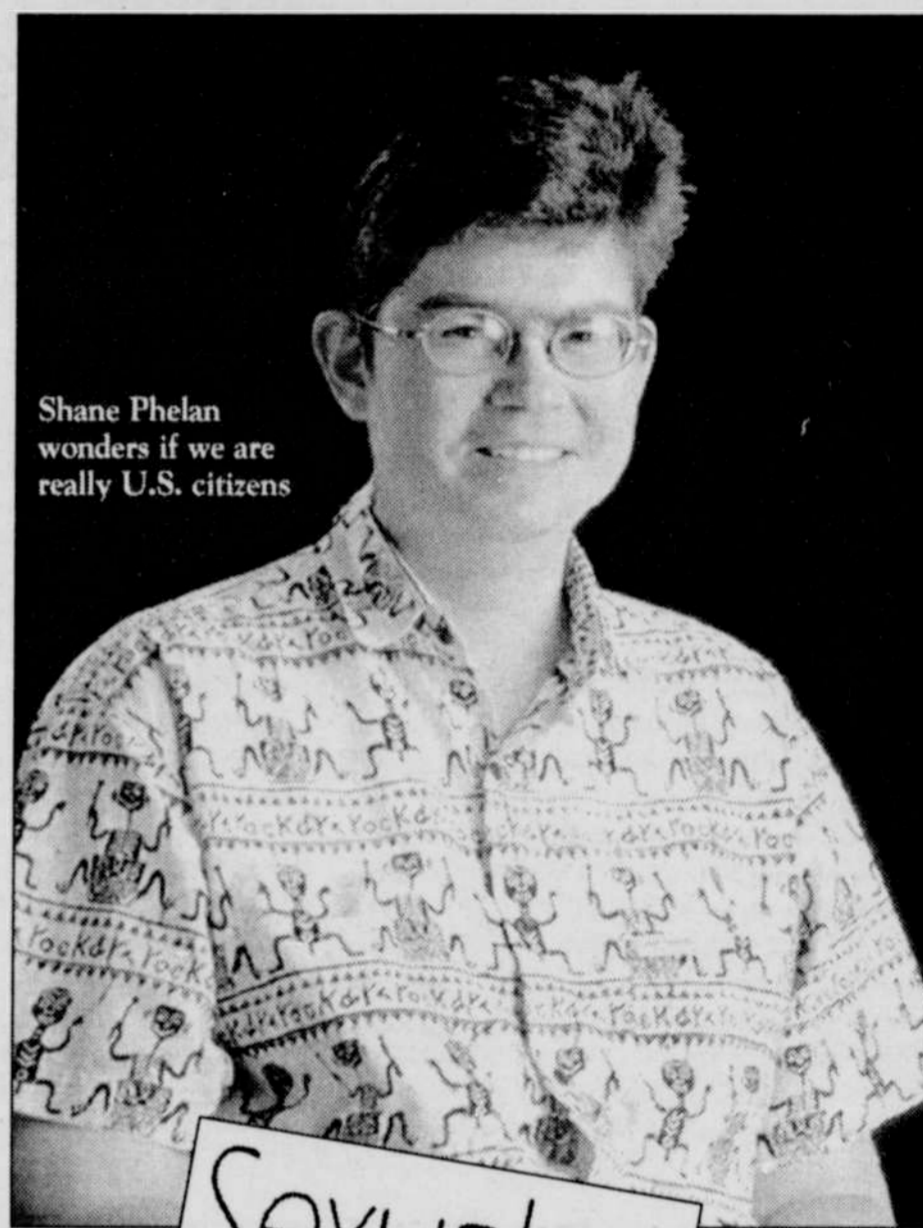
Shane Phelan: No, I don't. Many people would argue that the right to vote and hold office is the quintessence of citizenship, but that is too narrow a view.

Historically, citizenship has been composed of a number of elements. It has been a status that both confers privileges and entails responsibilities.

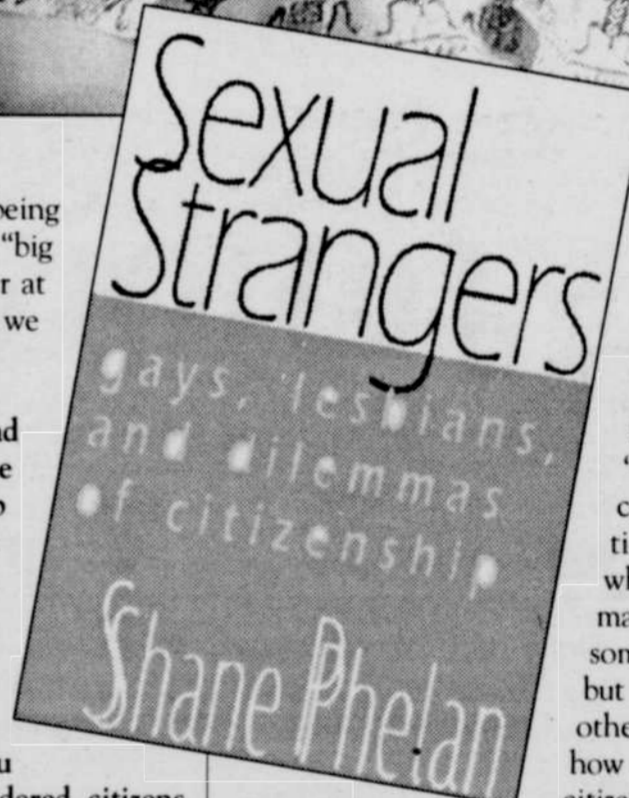
These privileges have included voting and holding office, but they have also included the right to own property, to work and free public education and [in Western Europe and Canada] decent health care and housing. The responsibilities of citizenship have included voting, serving on juries and military service. As women have found, being excluded from certain responsibilities that are seen as central to citizenship is as much a denial of membership as exclusion from privileges.

TM: What are some of the other systems of rights and responsibilities lesbians and gay men are excluded from in this way?

SP: Marriage is an interesting issue for citizenship, not because it is new to the definition of cit-



Shane Phelan wonders if we are really U.S. citizens



izenship—it isn't—Greek male citizens were required to be married—but because we now think of it as "private." But cases such as binational partners, where citizenship may be granted to some by marriage but not granted to others, make clear how closely entwined citizenship and marriage are.

In my research I found evidence of this link throughout European history and in the United States perhaps most glaringly in the decision to admit Utah and Idaho to statehood contingent upon their outlawing bigamy. The rhetoric of the committees and testimony before Congress could have come right out of the 1990s.

We are excluded from citizenship not only by the bans on marriage and military service, however, but also by the routine denial of police protection and concern for violence against us. If the fundamental promise of citizenship is acknowledgment of one another and common concern for one another's physical safety, then I would say that lesbians and gays are not yet citizens of the United States. They may be lucky enough to live in a jurisdiction that has outlawed hate crimes against us, but if those laws are not actually enforced they are not afforded the protection due to citizens.

TM: But does that really make gay people noncitizens or rather lesser citizens?

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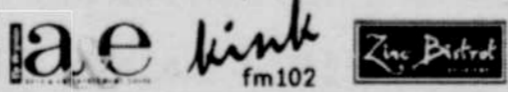
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