

# A QUEER NATIONALISM

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## 1

Queer Nation began in New York, without a name or a charter or a statement of purpose. It began in a small room in the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in April 1990 as a place to discuss homophobia and visibility issues. Many of the first people in attendance had been involved in the Teach-In on Lesbian and Gay Activist History that ACT UP organized for the Stonewall Celebration Gay Pride in New York. A visibility campaign focused on the frequent bashings of gays and lesbians in the East Village began with the second meeting and went from there to the "I HATE STRAIGHTS" pamphlet and then to the front page of the *Village Voice* by midsummer—from anonymity to scandal to celebrity within weeks.

The incorporation of homophobia and AIDS into a single issue was what had originally attracted many younger queers to directly involve themselves in ACT UP. Most of them were HIV-negative or untested and just beginning their involvement in political activism. ACT UP's emphasis on treatment issues left many of them baffled and disengaged: "I always felt like to be in ACT UP I needed to be educated, to know the drugs and the symptoms and the policies," explained one ACT UP member who later joined Queer Nation. AIDS was their issue because it was a *gay* issue in need of support, not because it was their *personal* issue. It was only by taking these two issues and seeing them as one that younger, HIV-negative members of ACT UP could feel as authentic as anyone else at meetings.

From its beginning, Queer Nation claimed this dual constituency of young queers just beginning to define themselves in terms of community and older AIDS activists. The

group grew quickly—in New York, there are now over three hundred people at every meeting, and in San Francisco, one hundred to one hundred seventy-five. Sometimes the burden of sudden celebrity makes the weight of anger and grief that arrives every week at meetings seem insupportable. In New York, there has been a growing lack of trust, a slow death of direct action as the group has grown in intensity and size. Although it is still alive and well, there are those who are already mistrustful of Queer Nation/NY, many of them women. In San Francisco, the center still holds.

The name has stuck simply for the sake of marketing. The original idea was this: choose a name around each action, keep responsibility with the individual and not with an institution. The strength here is in acting out of the present and going out into the faces of individuals. People are tired of groups with egos, processes, personality cults, and politicking. So far Queer Nation is individuals confronting individuals. This is not about institutions yet. We do not want a budget, charter, or a history beyond our work in the street.

## 2

Our anger may have brought us together again but it may drive us apart again. The news coverage on Queer Nation here and in cities across the country centers largely on the events of the group, cites ACT UP as a parent, but often dismisses Queer Nation itself. Any discussion of tactics invokes ACT UP but generally dismisses much of Queer Nation's actions as "fun," as if fun could not be important, could not be serious.

In particular, the press glorifies the "Queers Bash Back" idea. But there is something more than fun and retribution here: a sense of operating within a tradition of civil-rights movements, with strategies adapted from the women's movement, Black nationalism, the peace and nuclear freeze movements.

The original idea of Queer Nation is easily

transmitted, with or without the name. At Wesleyan, in the middle of Connecticut, Queer Nation's strategies for dealing with homophobia and invisibility are put to work on campus, where queers holding Nights Out at fraternity parties have changed straight students' awareness and queer students' visibility. At the University of Texas-Austin, students organized QUEERS to promote gay and lesbian visibility on campus. The group OUT-RAGE in London organizes around the same things. It's time.

### 3

Queer Nation/SF is as angry as it is funny. It is only as good as its strategies, which are simple ones, open to everyone. Distinctions are continually made between bluffs and threats. The group's sticker arsenal is considerable. Stickers often carry warnings—"Homophobia may be hazardous to your health." Nonviolence is practiced but conditional—something left out of the group's statement of purpose because people thought there would be less respect for the group's campaigns if nonviolence were specified.

"And what if we want to be violent?" said one member.

All Queer Nation/SF requires for membership is that you are a queer and you show up: stand up and be counted, in the street, in a bar, in the suburbs, in places of worship and places of legislation. Stand, fight, shout, laugh. Safety in numbers and in laughter are the strategies.

Queer Nation/SF's second action was a Be-In. People gathered at Pier 39 in San Francisco, faeries played drums, and a circle of men and a circle of women played spin-the-bottle. Tourists began taking photographs. Three hundred queers made their way onto Pier 39 and strolled past security guards, demanding to see a leader. They surrounded the carousel and everyone stayed until everyone had ridden. Boys in slips and sundresses, women in leather and bras, long hair, shaved heads, pierced eyebrows and lips.

A woman approached my friend John.

"Can you get everyone here to sing 'We are the world'?"

"No," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because it's a lie, because this is our march, and because you're straight."

"How do you know I'm straight?"

"I just do."

"Gay people have a responsibility to educate straights. How else are we going to

completely the antithesis of what we're fighting for. *You can be gay but only if you're gay in a way that is not threatening us.* Well, I'm sorry, I am threatening—you're fucked up, not me. There's room for everyone. And that's what I hope will happen with Queer Nation. Right now everyone's there, but it's awfully uncomfortable, and I hope that trend doesn't continue.

#### MIGUEL GUTIERREZ

Queerness means nonassimilationist to me, but even so, there is a sense of conforming to being queer. It's still a privileged thing to be queer. I don't feel it's inclusive—there are race



and class issues around this. There are people who cannot afford to be nonassimilationist; they are fighting just to live and eat. As an employed, somewhat educated person I can imagine not identifying with the white gay male movement.

I worry that being queer right now is more about nose-rings than about how you feel about yourself. Then I

see *Newsweek's* article on "Today's Youth," with its token white gay boy who's decided that he's not into promiscuity, wants a husband, kids, a house, and I know that I'm not represented by him, and that I don't identify with his priorities. In that sense, I am queer.

#### JASON BISHOP

I don't identify with the older generation of lesbian and gay men. Very cushy—brunch on Sunday and credit-card shopping all week long. I'm not a part of that all and never have been. *Queer* is much more inclusive of my family. I know gay men



learn?"

"Learn what? How to be queer? We have no responsibility to you; only to each other. We're just here."

It was a confrontation at once bizarre and typical. *Queer* is not so much a dreaded epithet as a secret password now. Those it describes are in, those it doesn't are out. At Crazy Nanny's, a lesbian bar in New York, a male friend was interrogated by the bouncer on the names of several gay porn stars before he could gain admission. "You better be a queer boy," the bouncer muttered. At the end of a recent Queer Nation meeting in San Francisco, a car passed the front of the building and the passengers shouted "Die, faggots!" Someone blocked the car with his own car and another stopped the passengers by jumping in front of them. We are developing our own rules of thumb. They are about safety and presence and boundaries.


## 4

It is a matter of language and a war of words.

It is also a name game. These are Queer Nation/SF's focus groups at this time: Suburban Homosexual Outreach Program

(SHOP), Lesbians And Bisexuals In Action (LABIA), Defending Our Rights In the Streets Super Queers United Against Savage Heterosexuals (DORIS SQUASH), Homosexual Ideological Mobilization against the Military (HI MOM), Artists Slaving Under Tyranny (ASLUT), Grand Homosexual Organization to Stop Televangelists (GHOST), Queers Undertaking Exquisite and Symbolic Transformation (QUEST), United Colors Of Queer Nation, Queer Planet, Queer State, Welcome Wagon. These are names that recall the glorious Street Transvestite Activists Revolution (STAR) and reaffirm that there will always be street queers.

The operant dream is of a community united in diversity, queerly ourselves. The reality works out okay so far. At the last meeting I attended, in a room of one hundred twenty people, thirty-two were women. People of color were a strong presence, with thirty heads counted. The age range was from seventeen to sixty-three and the mood was good. At the break, there was a five-minute meeting for newcomers. It was led by Miguel Gutierrez and Jennifer, who took great care to explain that everyone was welcome under the word *queer*.

One man asked how old the group  PAGE 19



who are my age who don't want anything to do with AIDS activism, don't want to know about HIV, don't want to know transsexuals, transvestites. It's not part of their world and it's not accepted. And frankly, I wouldn't want to be part of their society.

REBECCA HENSLE

A lot of what the "queer generation"



is arguing for is the same stuff that was being fought for by gay liberation. So it's not "lesbian/gay" vs. "queer." It's liberationist vs. assimilationist. It's not that there are young queers and older lesbians and gays. Younger queers are following in the footsteps, and a lot of them don't know they're following, and I think they should learn their own history.

The reason we don't know our own

history is that our history isn't taught to us in school. A lot of what I see from older lesbians, especially toward bisexuals and women who don't go by their rules, is, "You don't see how important all the fighting we did was." Well, if they're willing to put up with us for a little while and talk to us, if that communication starts, we can learn. And there's so much to learn about our history that's invisible to us now. I see myself as trying to learn from them, but it has to go both ways.

PEGGY SUE

I think we have much more free-

is. He looked bewildered at the answer: two months. His bewilderment was this: *What will this be in two more months?*

Inclusiveness is loud and defiant. LABIA is the oldest focus group, called to order at the first meeting. Their flyer includes a statement of purpose that pursues an agenda of positive visibility for lesbian and bisexual women as well as the agency to respond to lesbian-phobia and bi-phobia with "whatever means we deem appropriate." Rachel Pepper, a writer and activist who put out the call for a woman's group, said, "One third of the group is bisexual at this point and while most of us are dyke-identified and woman-oriented, many women have said they feel more welcome because of the name." The stickers for the group are energetic, in-your-face: *Dykes Take Over The World, Rape Is A Man's Issue.*

United Colors is slow to grow. Karl Knapper, an organizer for both Queer Nation media and United Colors, admits that while class prevents many from attending, he feels that until Queer Nation takes on race issues, most people of color will stay with their respective communities. "It's important to be here now at the beginning, and in general, I feel positively about being here. But I will not belong to a mixed-race gay men's group, and as a Black gay man, I have no alternative to this right now." Don Mark Chan, a writer and veteran of a number of political organizations, is enthused. "At the very first meeting I went to, I knew that if every other meeting were as mixed and energetic as that, I'd be very happy. A group is only as strong as it is diverse."

In New York, inclusiveness continues to be more of a problem. Kate Aurthur, now at Wesleyan University, is skeptical about Queer Nation/NY's survival: "Queer Nation continues to have a problem of inclusion, like ACT UP does. 'Bash Back' is a slogan and campaign that alienated a lot of women last summer; women have been dealing with violence and aggression all their lives.

"Deal with women's issues and you'll bring women in. Deal with the issues of communities of color and you'll bring people of color in. These white gay men are usually feeling scared for the first time in their lives in ways that women live with every day. An apt analysis of how these violent acts are different around a matrix of gender and color has yet to honestly affect the group's actions."

The women in New York originally resisted the idea of a women's caucus because it implicitly conceded that the floor was male.

There is something ancient about queerness. Knowledge of it seems fundamental, like breathing, or recognizing day from night and back again. *Queer* is a word that has been thrown at me since childhood—like *chink, gook, jap, flat-face*: those were words for my face and skin. *Queer* was then and is now to me about spirit, about a fundamental internal difference that people can see in your eye. Or not. It hangs about you like a psychic tattoo.

Other children shouted *queer* at me as if it would keep them safe. Although I hated them, I wanted nothing of their acceptance; I knew that I was different. There was something in queers that scared them. I enjoyed this. Now that I call myself queer, know myself as a queer, nothing will keep them safe.

If I tell them I am queer, they give me room. Politically, I can think of little better. Fifteen years later, I still don't care if they accept me or not; I do not want to be one of them. They only need to give me room.

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