

INSIGHTS RICHARD ROTHSTEIN: THE CASE AGAINST FREE TRADE WITH MEXICO

THE
BIRTH
OF A

FREE
Nation



AND THE DEATH OF "GAY" AND "LESBIAN"

BY DOUG SADOWNICK

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QUEER Nation

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Standing in line outside Paramount Studios, Scott Robbe checked his watch. Six-thirty. In a half-hour *The Arsenio Hall Show* would begin its live taping. A TV producer who had recently arrived from New York, Robbe tried to remain oblivious to the Hall fans around him, who occasionally would break out into the talk-show host's trademark "Whoo! Whoo!" chant and gyrate their fists. Robbe was cold — this was December, after all — and he was nervous. In a half-hour he and 12 colleagues plan to disrupt *The Arsenio Hall Show*.

In the language of gay and lesbian politics, what Robbe and his cohorts were going to do was "zap" Hall — publicly embarrass him for his lack of gay guests and for his anti-gay routines. In the late '80s, ACT UP had institutionalized the tactic as a way to disrupt opponents with warnings (phone calls, sit-ins, kiss-ins) that apathy about AIDS could no longer be tolerated. Robbe and his friends wanted to go one step further: to take the zap to national TV.

As the crowd of 400 filed into the studio, Robbe continued to fret. The minute he and his colleagues identified themselves as part of the gay and lesbian group Queer Nation, all hell would break loose. And the protesters had every intention of identifying themselves. Underneath their sweaters, they wore T-shirts, some brilliantly colored, some black-and-white. Jaime Green's displayed bright, lime-green words that read: "Queer Boy." Tom Mertz's read: "Every Tenth Jesus Is a Queer." Others had concealed green-and-yellow fluorescent stickers that announced "A Queer Nation Warning/Caution: Homophobia May Be Hazardous to Your Health!" or proclaimed the motto "You Say Don't Fuck, We Say Fuck You."

Queer Nation began a year ago in New York, and almost immediately attracted hundreds of burnt-out ACT UP members, community leaders and self-proclaimed "baby dykes and fags" who wanted to organize around something besides AIDS. Queer Nation defined itself as a "militant and uncompromising group dedicated to subverting compulsory heterosexism in all its political and cultural manifestations through direct public actions which will celebrate and flaunt sexual diversity."

Despite the unwieldy rhetoric, the basic idea — people marginalized through gender-orientation, uniting on a national basis to "promote homosexuality" — gained celebrity status fast. "In the '70s, you couldn't get a handful to meetings," observed the late film critic Vito Russo. "Where are all these people coming from?" By last summer, Queer Nation boasted sizable chapters in Los Angeles and San Francisco, with newer groups springing up in 50 cities, including such unlikely places as Salt Lake City and Dallas.

Like ACT UP before it, Queer Nation has thrived on the politics of panache — following activist Brett McGuire's imperative, "Go Out There and Be Fabulous!" The organization's very name was conceived as a crafty marketing ploy that showed lesbians and gays redefining a term of oppression with an in-your-face, media-savvy élan. True, the ruse did alienate lesbians and gays who cringe at calling themselves by an epithet. "Gays who use that word are doing the full-time work of gay-bashers," argues Charles Ortleb, publisher of *The New York Native* and *Christopher Street*, New York's establishment gay journals.

A movement should be art-directed: The "Every Tenth Jesus Is a Queer" poster

But aversion was far from unanimous. Queer Nation tapped into a growing distrust within the gay community of its mainstream institutions (here in L.A., this means West Hollywood), questioning the ability of polite lobbying, checkbook activism and electoral campaigns to effect political change. If, as journalist Randy Shilts says, AIDS has taken all the "fun" out of being gay, "queerness" has resurrected it, suggesting there is life beyond AIDS, a politics beyond ACT UP and a dress code besides leather.

Queer Nation's tactics can be ridiculously simple. During "Nights Out," activists flock to straight bars to play spin-the-bottle until they get kicked out. Queer Nationals in L.A. and San Francisco trek to suburban malls in drag to howl, "We're Here, We're Queer and We're Not Going Shopping!" In San Francisco, Queer Nation banners in the Castro announce, "Straights: Behave or Be Gone!"

In what has been their most controversial tactic, members of the L.A. chapter have put up posters throughout the city identifying such entertainment moguls as David Geffen and Merv Griffin as gay. What makes the L.A. chapter unique, says Scott Robbe, is its proximity to the film and TV industry — the media goliath that accounts for the nation's blackout on anything but twisted portrayals of homosexuality. For Robbe, Arsenio Hall — the hippest commodity to emerge from that machine lately — represents Hollywood homophobia at its worst. "He's so blatant," says Queer Nation member Tom Mertz, "yet so unchecked."

The local chapter of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), a media watchdog group, had written Hall letters complaining about what its executive director, Rich Jennings, called "countless, mindless attacks." Jennings cited a June 1989 monologue in which Hall mocked the Gay Pride parade, pursing his lips and mincing toward the camera, launching into a routine about frightened heterosexuals who treat the parade "like a Lion Country Safari, people locking their doors and rolling up their car windows." Robbe could recall numerous examples of Hall ridiculing gays. Which was why he had decided to crash the show.

By the time Hall was ready to introduce his first guest, Robbe could feel the adrenaline running through him. So could Mertz and Tony Heric. They shot up from their seats, and his colleagues joined him, screaming, "Where are the gay guests?"

Hall was taken aback. "There are a lot of gay guests on my show," he stammered, "but they don't like to talk about their sexual preference, so we don't know whether they're gay or not!" Applause for Hall and boos for the protesters. "This ain't Merv," he shouted. "This ain't Johnny. I ain't going to run from this."

Robbe, Mertz and Heric recited names of public gay figures Hall might invite — director Gus Van Sant (*Drug Store Cowboy*), writer/actor Harvey Fierstein (*Torch Song Trilogy*), playwright and ACT UP founder Larry Kramer. Hall responded, "I had Elton John and he rocked the house... when Harvey has something I'm interested in, I'll bring him on the show." (Two months later, Hall invited Fierstein and they discussed the incident.) He then repeated, "But this is my show, okay!" — five times. "You think I haven't had someone on my show 'cause they're gay? What's wrong with you, man? I'm black. I'm the biggest minority I know. I don't want to hear that gay trash... You want to book it, get

yourself a show!"

When the protesters were escorted out, they looked downtrodden. Robbe agonized over not being able to compete with Hall's mike. But the airing of the interchange later that night told a different story. Hall railed on too long, sounding defensive and hectoring, turning a potential victory into a draw — maybe even a defeat. "Why is it that you can do jokes about anything, but when you do a gay joke, I got idiots in here protesting over it. You don't see Dan Quayle here! What's your problem, man, lighten up [bleep, bleep] and enjoy it."

The Arsenio Hall zap put Queer Nation/L.A. on the activist map — and on the evening news. (On a subsequent show, Bill Cosby lectured Hall about his anti-gay humor; when Hall cut him off with a commercial, Cosby quipped, "I may not be here when the commercial's over.")

Up to that point, Queer Nation had been dismissed by the local gay establishment. Now there was no denying it had arrived. For many, the group represents a new coming out — something beyond gay and lesbian. In the words of Scott Robbe, "Queer Nation — queerness itself — represents the idea that we are constitutionally different from straights and have a culture of our own."

But how long would this new coming out last? Would Queer Nation learn from ACT UP's mistakes and embolden diverse segments of lesbians and gays? Or would it alienate everyone — including the larger gay community — through tactics that seemed too petulant and, paradoxically enough, too white and too male?

ON APRIL 27, 1990, UNCLE Charlie's South, a popular gay bar in New York City's Greenwich Village, was pipe-bombed; three gays were rushed to St. Vincent's Hospital. A group of ACT UP/N.Y. members who had been casually meeting on their own called an emergency gathering to protest the rise in the city's hate crimes by 122 percent that year. The June 17 march drew thousands of angry lesbians and gays brandishing posters ("My Beloved Was Queer-Bashed Here") to wheat-paste all over downtown. Previously, anti-bias demonstrations had been non-violent. But this time, when straights shouted epithets at the demonstrators and jostled them, the marchers pushed back, prompting the first rash of news coverage on hate crimes. The tabloids slapped on what would become the gay movement's most controversial motto — "Bash Back!" — as their headline. A week later, Queer Nation was formed.

The need for a direct-action group to focus on lesbian and gay suffrage was obvious to anyone paying attention last year. Andrew Dice Clay's popularity was to a large degree predicated on his audience's loathing of gays; Senator Jesse Helms exploited intolerance of gays to cripple the National Endowment for the Arts; Andy Rooney announced on *60 Minutes* that homosexuality was an illness.

Animosity could be expected from the right. But from the left? Last winter, Pete Hamill made a "progressive" case that gays had become too loud and uppity. In an *Esquire* column entitled "Confessions of a Heterosexual," he wrote: "I am tired of listening to people who identify themselves exclusively by what they do with their cocks." Hamill went on: he was "ashamed of some of the things I did [but] then came AIDS... Now I find myself struggling with the powerful undertow of the primitive codes of my youth."

In response came an essay entitled "I Hate Straights," written anonymously. The essay argued that the gay community had become too self-righteous and too focused on its own problems, ignoring the broader social issues. It called for a more inclusive and less confrontational approach to activism.

WHEN ARSENIO GETS BUSY, QUEERS GET BASHED.



If you watch the Arsenio Hall Show, you'll think dykes and fags are just there for your entertainment and ridicule. And you'll think that queers don't love or live or hurt or deserve respect like any other minority. If you know better, we have an idea for you: switch the tv channel to any other late night horror show.

Bashing back: A Queer Nation handbill

DARYL GATES, JOEL WACHS AND QUEER NATION

"Lesbians and gay men in our city have long been among those singled out for assault and unequal enforcement of the law at the hands of the LAPD," says Jon W. Davidson, the Southern California ACLU's senior staff counsel for lesbian and gays rights. Over the past two years, one of every six anti-gay and lesbian hate crimes reported to L.A.'s Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center were incidents of police abuse, contends Roger Coggen, director of legal services at the center. In the last two years, says Coggen, 60 incidents of anti-gay-and-lesbian police misconduct have been reported to the center. (According to police press spokesperson Lieutenant Fred Nixon, the LAPD does not keep separate records of anti-gay-and-lesbian police-abuse cases.)

During the month preceding the Rodney King beating, Coggen says that five incidents of LAPD misconduct were reported, including officers slamming a gay man's head against a car hood and breaking the ribs of a handcuffed man. In February, the LAPD raided a lesbian benefit and dance at LACE and arrested five participants for violating alcohol laws and "running a dance hall." The city attorney refused to file charges. The women, four of whom are of color, say they were physically and verbally assaulted.

Davidson and Coggen lay the blame for the LAPD's "institutional homophobia" on Chief Daryl Gates; so do numerous others in the gay and lesbian political establishment. Christopher McCauley and Morris Kight, respectively the two openly gay members of the Los Angeles City and County Human Relations Commissions, have been particularly critical of Gates' refusal to recruit openly gay and lesbian cops (in contrast to New York and San Francisco) and to hire any openly gay liaisons to the gay or lesbian community. Mitch Grobeson, the one policeman who has come out in recent years, was harassed so severely, he claims, that he was forced from the department. He has filed a \$5-million suit against the LAPD, the city and 15 police officers. Deputy City Attorney Arthur Walsh, who is representing the LAPD and the city, says, "We don't think he can establish that the city or police department had a practice of harassing gays and

ymously by some ACT UP/N.Y. members and distributed during the 1990 Gay Pride parade. (It would later be the cover story in the influential New York gay and lesbian magazine, *OutWeek*.) "I Hate Straights" gave voice to the rage many gays harbor toward even the most well-intentioned of heterosexuals. It began: "I hate having to convince straight people that lesbians and gays live in a war zone, that we're surrounded by bomb blasts only we seem to hear, that our bodies and souls are heaped high, dead from fright or bashed or raped, dying of grief or disease, stripped of our personhood."

Borrowing from the rhetoric of black nationalism, the essay addressed such issues as self-defense and cultural identity: "They've taught us that good queers don't get mad... They bash us and stab us and shoot us and bomb us in ever-increasing numbers and still we freak out when angry queers carry banners or signs that say 'Bash Back!'... Let yourself be angry that the price of our visibility is the constant threat of violence to which practically every segment of this society contributes... The next time some straight person comes down on you for being angry, tell them you don't want any more baby pictures shoved in your face until you can have or keep your own. Tell them, go away and try on a world without the brave strong queers that are its guts and brains and souls... until they have spent a month walking hand in hand in public with someone of the same sex."

To say the least, "I Hate Straights" was a call to arms. If Queer Nation emerged as a direct response to ACT UP's restrictive focus on AIDS, it was also a direct outgrowth of ACT UP's militant success. It's impossible to imagine Queer Nation without ACT UP coming first. The militant populism that ACT UP choreographed (crowds storming the Federal Drug Administration, "die-ins" at L.A.'s Federal Building) gave gay politics not just muscle but, just as important, cultural cachet. In New York, L.A. and San Francisco, ACT UP meetings replaced bars as ideal pickup spots. The men who chained themselves to the stock market and the women who made officials at the National Institute of Allergies and

lesbians."

Although Gates' comment about hiring gays and lesbians — "Who'd want to work with one?" he told an *L.A. Times* reporter in 1982 — remains infamous, much of the gay community was slow in speaking out on the Rodney King case. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) just announced that it will join the June 1 rally to recall Gates.

One of the chief exceptions has been Queer Nation, which has participated in the Committee to Recall Gates from the start. Two weeks ago, the group thrust itself into the Gates' debate in its typically controversial way — by targeting one of Gates' most vocal supporters: L.A. City Councilman Joel Wachs. At a May 10 demonstration at City Hall, Queer Nation members brandished placards of Wachs that demanded, "Joel, you must stop supporting Police Chief Gates and the other queer-bashing cops. Support your queer sisters and brothers instead."

The protest has its roots in several letters written to Wachs by gay attorneys Thomas J. Coleman Jr., Leroy S. Walker and Mickey Wheatley (a member of Queer Nation). The initial letter, written by Coleman on April 8 and released to the press, began: "As one gay man to another," and continued, "When a well-known and documented bigot like Chief Gates is placed on paid leave, why do you jump through hoops of fire to put him back on the job?"

Wachs replied the same day with his own letter. It began just as forcefully: "Your memo is simply not true," he asserted. "No one in City Hall has fought harder against LAPD anti-gay discrimination than I." He did not respond to Coleman's assumption that he was gay.

Wachs has long been a major supporter of the gay community. In 1978, he authored the city ordinance prohibiting discrimination against gays and lesbians; his 1985 bill making it a crime to discriminate against people with AIDS was the first in the country. Recently, he helped push through the City Council a million-dollar housing project and a \$225,000 education program for people with AIDS. To many, Queer Nation is attacking the wrong person.

Away on business, Wachs was unavailable for comment. His chief deputy, Greg Nelson, said that he would not address the issue of Wachs' sexual preference. Wachs, he says, is not supporting Gates as much as he is due process. "We



Targeted: Councilman Joel Wachs

Infectious Diseases open up clinical trials to females became movement stars.

But ACT UP's success also led to its unraveling. As some members won recognition from the government and were asked to shape and implement policy, ACT UP was accused of losing its outsider's edge. In addition, ACT UP never overcame its reputation as a gay, white, male organization — that the concerns of women and people of color were secondary. ACT UP also never established an internal structure (much less an agreed-upon language) to examine and work through its internal divisions. It was an organization waiting to fragment.

Last September, ACT UP in San Francisco split during an ugly public brawl; some wanted ACT UP to agitate for health-care reform while others demanded the group just focus on AIDS. Chapters in Portland, Boston and Chicago were similarly shaken; ACT UP/L.A. went on two retreats to resolve animosities.

This left a vacuum for Queer Nation — for a gay and lesbian movement that could address internal differences as much as external enemies. As Maria Mejia of Queer Nation points out, over the last 20 years, gay had come to mean "male only" and lesbian to mean "men not welcome." In perhaps its most brilliant stroke, Queer Nation tries to amplify and resolve those distinctions head-on by its very name. By employing the word "queer," the group isn't just subverting an old curse but is declaring a new definition. Just as in the '60s, African-Americans took on "black" (many reluctantly) and diffused its racist edge to establish a new collective identity, gays and lesbians now use "queer" as a badge of honor; the word is a slap in the face to old-style gay assimilationists — those who say,

"We're the same as straights except for what we do in bed."

In the words of Queer Nation/L.A. member Wayne Katt, "The only thing we have in common with straights is what we do in bed." As Gabriel Rotello, editor in chief of *OutWeek*, the magazine that has best covered (and promoted) the revolution in queerness, says, "For the first time, gays and lesbians are demanding to be recognized for their inherent dissimilarities with straights." And in the estimation of novelist and activist Paul Monette, "Queer Nation represents a revolution unparalleled since [the 1969] Stonewall [Riots]."

EVERYONE AGREES THAT THE MEETINGS ARE ONE of the best things about Queer Nation. On a recent Saturday meeting, Cory Roberts lumbers in, decked out in combat boots, jeans and a vest decorated in fluorescent green stickers that say, "Eliminate Heterosexual Privilege." Underneath there's another layer: a skintight, fishnet, full-body leotard, spangled with rhinestones. It's impossible to make sartorial generalizations about Queer Nation, but Roberts' outfit captures certain overlapping strains: it's a classic marriage of militant homosexuality and drag queen. But then so is Jenna White's uniform full of androgynous imagery as well: with her black baseball cap, black jeans and nose ring, she could pass as a postmodern little leaguer.

Mickey Wheatley sashays in with what he calls his "Tanya" get-up: his black wig, red leather jacket and pumps mime the most famous recruit of the Symbionese Liberation Army. Barbara Bailey sports a "Queer Girl" T-shirt, which is in startling contrast to her Barbara Bush look; and she wears her Queer Nation button like a talisman ("I look like a nice, white-haired older woman, how else would people know I'm a dyke?"). Luz Calvo strides in with black combat boots, black short shorts and a collection of nose rings.

Such styles speak as much to Queer Nation's propensity for panache as they do for the group's commitment to anarchy. Indeed, learning to speak

need departmental reform, not the ouster of Gates," Nelson went on. "It should be the Christopher Commission and not the mayor who decides whether or not Gates should stay chief of police."

Queer Nation's attack on Wachs came at a time when City Hall was rife with rumors that the reluctance of the council to act against Gates was due in part to dossiers that the LAPD held on the sexual- and drug-related offenses of several members who had previously been critical of the department. Gates helped fan the rumors himself when he appeared on *Nightline* on the eve of the council's vote reinstating him and told Ted Koppel, "If I really laid it on the line — and I think the people of this city know me well — when I do, watch out!" Last week, Police Commissioner Melanie Lomax wondered on the record what many City Hall insiders have been wondering off: "There are lots of questions about why Richard Alatorre [is doing this], why Joel Wachs."

Mickey Wheatley defends Queer Nation's actions on the grounds that when "the closet begins to be the main thing a politician is protecting, it affects public policy for everyone." Wayne Karr says that Queer Nation members are so proud of their identities that they see "outing" not as punishment, but a statement leading to a more open society: "What we need is the right to be openly gay, not the right to hide."

Karr is echoing a position voiced by *OutWeek* editor Gabriel Rotello: "The movement's strategic focus on the 'right to privacy' has now become a quest for a right to secrecy, a right to hide one's homosexuality from a hostile world. Such a strategy, necessary as it once was to create the conditions whereby a gay community could come into being, is now destructive and reactionary when it conflicts with openness and honesty."

Many disagree. GLAAD's Carol Anderson assails the campaign against Wachs as "McCarthyism of the worst variety." She adds that "outing" ends up splintering the gay and lesbian community more than it hurts its enemies: "We came out in our time and must allow that psychological freedom to others."

Queer Nation's Jaime Green, who is also a member of the mainstream Stonewall Democratic Club, deplores the attack on the councilman. "This debate deflects time and money from the real culprit, Gates."

Last week, Wachs called for Mayor Bradley to make a "historic appointment" of the city's first openly gay or lesbian police commissioner. Queer Nation activists are taking credit for the move.

—D.S.

the codes of people from different tax brackets, neighborhoods and genders takes time, says Patt Riese. What distinguishes Queer Nation/L.A. from other chapters, she says, is that "We don't make organizing actions more important than getting to know each other."

Which is not to say that organizing actions doesn't form the heart of Queer Nation. Tonight's meeting begins as they all do: on Saturday, at 6 p.m., in the spacious, brightly lit Grand Room at West Hollywood's Plummer Park. It's appointed with lurid-colored banners of ambisexual men and women embracing, painted by artist Bill Rangel. Roughly a hundred people go around in a circle and introduce themselves. Someone offers to run the meeting. In ACT UP, you have to be trained (and masochistic) to take on that duty, but here everything's easier: Queer Nation veterans Kate Sorensen and Richard Grey volunteer. What's immediately striking is not just the presence of lesbians and gays in one room, but that they are not sitting at opposite ends. Patt Riese and Wayne Karr even hold hands. Barbara Bailey and Richard Iosti — two of the firebrands in the group — are supporting each other's proposals, with a vengeance.

For the last 20 years, lesbians and gays have entertained something of an aversion to each other's causes, never mind wardrobes. Kate Sorensen contends that gay male culture took on many of the worst symptoms of heterosexual culture at large: classism, racism, sexism and, worst of all, a homophobia (in this case, self-hatred) that turned its nose at overt statements of queerness (such as drag queens) and femininity (such as lesbians). Women preferred to organize on their own rather than be rendered invisible yet again.

But with the unchecked rise of homophobia in the '80s, and the concurrent rise in AIDS activism, it began occurring to certain activists that perhaps gays and lesbians had more in common. After all, to homophobes, gays and lesbians are cut from the same ungodly cloth. If the right saw unity where there was none, couldn't homosexuals?

This question is implicit in every gathering of

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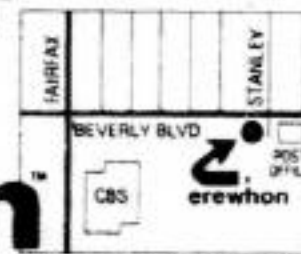
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QUEER Nation

Queer Nation.

"All my life I've been a lesbian separatist," admits Patt Riese. "But the collaboration between the men and the women in Queer Nation makes me revise everything I feel about gay men, and in the process myself." She insists that "lesbian" no longer applies to her. And then she adds something that one is beginning to hear more and more: "My identity as a queer comes before my identity as a woman."

Cory Roberts echoes this sentiment: "I don't define myself as gay anymore. 'Queer' implies a joining of male/female energies that 'gay' never did." Wayne Karr, who goes out with women as well as men (and wears a dress on all dates), argues that being gay, like being Jewish, is a way of looking at the world: "The fucking is the least of it."

Barbara Bailey says that Queer Nation has liberated her from her former separatist politics. She no longer tolerates, she says, "women who give me shit for being male-identified." On the other hand, she doesn't disguise her impatience when a badly beaten-up kid arrives and announced that it's going to take him years to get over having been gay-bashed. "Doll," she draws, "don't reinvent the wheel. We women have invented rape counseling and have gotten over our traumas quicker than that." Then she suggests that Queer Nation develop a bashing hot line; volunteers would be on call to provide counseling at hospitals any time an attack took place.

Not every lesbian (or gay man) is as ready to ditch their gender identity altogether. Pipes in Kate Sorensen, "Being a lesbian is my protection against the shit I know the men will come up with." Still, she recognizes that such divisions can do Queer Nation in. Like everyone else in Queer Nation/L.A., she reacted with horror to the reports that the San Francisco and New York chapters were on the verge of splitting along gender lines. She helped initiate a subgroup in L.A. called Gender Queries that, in the words of Cory Roberts, "seeks to create a new intimacy between gays and lesbians." The group's very existence seems to distinguish the L.A. chapter from most others.

So far, the strain in Queer Nation isn't along gender lines, thanks in part to Gender Queries, but along (for lack of a better term) ideological lines. On one side are those who'd like to make the group a fighting machine against homophobia (particularly Hollywood homophobia). On the other side are those who would like to "spiritualize" the group. This is not just a parochial, internal fight over tactics, but one that is raging within gay communities around the world: How do you define gay and lesbian identity?

"Constructivists," like Queer Nation's Richard Iosti and Jenna White, argue that gay identity is a social construction formed in reaction to repression. What most people understand as "gay," argue Iosti and White, is a post-1969 consciousness: modern gays are not the same people as Greek homosexuals or Native American cross-dressers — there are a hundred anthropological differences that separate Plato from Harvey Milk.

"Essentialists" see gay identity as transcending history and culture. In Los Angeles (and in San Francisco), the group that best espouses this position is the Radical Faeries, some of whose members helped establish Queer Nation. The Faeries, who might be called the "spiritualists" of the movement, insist on a metaphysical underpinning of gay and lesbian identity. Conceived by Harry Hay in the '70s, the Faerie movement rejected gay urban life (what Hay called hetero-aping behavior, which could be found in bars, discos and executive suites) and resurrected a rural culture centered around goddess worship.

Iosti calls such theories "idiocy." He demonstrates the ACT UP-activist strain within Queer Nation: "Sometimes I feel like I'm a lot angrier than other people and feel this gulf between me and them. Don't people see the immense power of homophobia?" Iosti believes Queer Nation ought to remain a direct-action group. He's now heading the campaign against the Paul Verhoeven film *Basic Instinct*, which depicts two lesbians as deranged murderers. (He helped organize the picketing of Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* for its portrayal of the mass murderer as a homosexual.) To him, "spiritualizing" Queer Nation is as regressive as it is unnecessary. "Isn't that

what the Christians do in attacking us?" Iosti asks.

SO FAR, THESE DIVISIONS HAVE NOT UNDERMINED QUEER NATION. THIS SPRING, Christian fundamentalists (many Operation Rescue veterans) have been harassing pedestrians on Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood. Rather than responding with a single tactic, Queer Nation allowed all of its contingents to pursue their own courses of action. Iosti and Barbara Bailey would get hoarse screaming, "Out of our neighborhood!" Wayne Karr, in a black, cotton Faerie gown, would perform oral sex on a plastic body of Jesus. Phil Tarley would wield a dildo in the faces of praying Christians. Brett McGuire would chant goddess prayers, occasionally interjecting, "We're beautiful but evil girlfriends who live in a cult!" It's not clear whether it was McGuire's or Karr's or Iosti's tactics that sent the fundamentalists packing. But the feeling within Queer Nation is that it doesn't matter.

Perhaps more than anything else, Queer Nation/L.A.'s tolerance — its capacity to absorb, and sometimes resolve, the tensions that run through gay and lesbian life — has given it such prominence so quickly after having been founded. Jaime Green, who along with Morris Kight was one of the founders of L.A.'s Gay Liberation Front in the early '70s, says, "Queer Nation reminds me of the beginning of the gay movement — young, enthusiastic, sensitive people who don't want to spend their lives in the bars. The only difference is that now there's a helluva lot of people who'll work with those they have disliked; they don't give a shit who you are. As an older man, that's liberating."

The spirit that Green refers to is called "anarchy" within Queer Nation. And, as might be expected, there's a controversy about that as well. "We refuse to follow the models of ACT UP, even though we admire it," says Sorensen. "For example, we won't have a bank account." That decision threatened to split the group. Activists like Iosti and James Rosen accused upstarts of what they called "fascist anarchy." Why not be as efficient as possible? they demanded. Maria Mejia responded that by not having a checking account, the group could not be sued or monitored. Anarchy won.

Others wanted the chapter to adopt a voting procedure to speed up decision making. But Wayne Karr says the absence of voting keeps tensions low and discussions open. Recently, Radical Faerie doyenne Mickey Wheatley proposed to make a controversial flier that targeted L.A. Council Member Joel Wachs for supporting Police Chief Daryl Gates. (See accompanying story.) Under Wachs' portrait read, "Queer and Present Danger." In ACT UP, Wheatley's idea would have had to be approved by a vote. Not here. Richard Grey stepped in and said, "Mickey has clearly worked hard on it. Even if you disagree, I suggest we support his ideas and move on." The next week, Wheatley's revised poster suited most everyone.

"There's no such thing as the Queer Nation organization," Sorensen says. "It's a punk ethic," adds Mejia. "You want an activity, you organize it."

In the nine months since it's been formed, Queer Nation has generated activities at rapid speed. The group pressured the L.A. Coalition Against Intervention in the Middle East to write a demand for lesbian and gay rights in its bylaws; Wayne Karr became the first gay man to be elected to the coordinating body. Queer Nation has persuaded the city of West Hollywood to disallow Barney's Beanery from expanding; the West Hollywood restaurant has a history of discriminating against gays. A zap at the West Hollywood Sports Connection succeeded in pressuring management to no longer make it mandatory for its mostly gay clientele to wear briefs in the sauna and shower areas. During the Rodney King hearings, Queer Nation insisted that police brutality against gays be included in the larger discussion. In February, Queer Nation, led by Barbara Bailey, crashed a banquet at the Music Center for the L.A. Commission on Women; Bailey charged the commission with denying the presidency to commissioner Myra Rydell because she was a lesbian.

There have been setbacks. The first meeting of Queer Nation attracted 300 people; they trekked to Barney's Beanery to celebrate (and protest). Some activists threw a tantrum when they were made to wait for service. Police arrived, the demonstration got no media attention, no one got served, and few returned to Queer Nation. On May 16,

Wheatley and McGuire will go to trial on misdemeanor trespassing charges stemming from their protest of a conference at the Long Beach Sheraton called by Phyllis Schlafly's Concerned Women of America. The trial marks the first time that Queer Nation activists have been prosecuted in Southern California.

ON JANUARY 24, JAIME GREEN AND BARBARA BAILEY SLAPPED CRACK-AND-PEEL fluorescent stickers on people's leather jackets — "Fags for Mother Earth," "Dyke Power." Drums pounded. A few men in high heels



Barbara Bailey: Queer Nation breaks down the barriers between lesbian and gay (above). Jaime Green: Queer Nation's "anarchy" opens the group to everyone (below).

QUEER NATION

stomped their feet while motorcycle dykes slammed fists in their gloved palms to keep warm in the night air.

Gay-related hate crimes increased by 45 percent last year, according to the L.A. County Commission on Human Relations. The Queer Defense March was conceived as a way to recruit people to patrol the streets of West Hollywood. But already some Queer Nation members saw too many messages at work: to introduce Queer Nation to West Hollywood; to send a message to attackers that they were not safe; to try out the new motto: "Bash Back!"

Maria Mejia explained that "Bash Back!" wasn't so much a threat as an attempt to show the community that it was capable of taking care of itself. But would anyone pay attention to such shadings? Two hundred cacophonous marchers made their way from Plummer Park down the median strip on Santa Monica Boulevard through a throng of Lacoste-clad men who were migrating from bar to bar. The march doubled, then tripled in size, with people roaring: "An attack on one of us is an attack on all of us." Whistles blew. Drums slammed. Cars stopped.

As the march passed the leather bars — Spike and the Eagle — bystanders responded to the march in radically unexpected ways. Some inebriated queens ran toward the demonstrators, agreeing that the Gulf War had to end. Several doormen prevented marchers from entering the bars and distributing pamphlets. The manager of Mother Lode said he had "no damn idea what the group was about" and thought it was a bunch of bashers.

"Is this some fucking joke?" one GQ candidate asked, pointing to the banner with "Queer Nation" emblazoned across it. "It's taken me years to get that word out of my head."

The sentiment came as a shock to the demonstrators. "We forget that there's a large chunk of gays who think they are liberated," said Karr, "but they live in a ghetto and are still closeted to their bosses and families. Until they learn to love themselves, they're guilty of hate crimes to us all."

Although leaders like National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Urvashi Vaid and the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center's Torie Osborn employ the word "queer" copiously, there's a growing backlash to the use of the word. "I've never approved of the spit-and-polish public-image way of approaching non-gays," says Jim Kepner, curator of the International Gay and Lesbian Archives. "But I'm uncomfortable slapping people in the face with styles that are definitely not mine, or those of most gays. I hope Queer Nation will remember the agony such a term still imposes on others of us." Campion Reed, president of New York's Stonewall Democratic Club, acknowledges that gays and lesbians require a new term to unite them — "but that word isn't 'queer.'"

Many people of color agree. The group's mostly white makeup, they charge, does not reflect a "nation." Robert Garcia, an influential ACT UP strategist, says a white group that bases itself on bashing back and hating straights will never speak to gays and lesbians of color. "We must live within our communities, friends and families: we can't afford to 'hate straights.' When you set up an institution that's all white, you're going to be guilty of the same bigotry you accuse your enemy of." Gay Latino artist Mike Moreno was turned off by Queer Nation's presence at anti-Daryl Gates rallies: "If groups are going to represent lesbians and gays, they should represent all of us, not just what is white and what shocks people."

The Queer Defense March was seen as a victory by the group. But a few weeks later, Judy Helfand of Queer Nation/S.F. wondered if "belligerence and brute anger among Queer Nationals wasn't just a symptom of how polluted we are by the patriarchy." She understood being angry at gay-bashers, but she argued it was wrong to take that fury out on the community under attack, no matter how asleep the victims seem to be. Even Queer Nation member Mickey Wheatley questions the "Bash Back!" ethos: "Don't forget there are more straights than there are of us. We are doomed to lose if we fight them with their own tactics; we perpetuate the culture we hate so much."

WHEN I WAS IN SAN FRANCISCO recently, I had sex with a lesbian. The feelings we tried to invent were not those from our miserable straight teens when performance mattered more than love. They were about understanding that the appeal of the opposite sex was available to us too, but in a way that served to enhance homosexual ardor. Ardent homosexuality is what we had in common. Later, when each of us slept in the arms of a person of the same sex, it seemed more lovely than ever. I came away from San Francisco, hardly thinking of myself as a bisexual, but for the first time the word "queer" had tangible meaning.

I was certainly not about to prescribe sex as a cure to political divisiveness. But I did finally understand what Queer Nation's Pat Riese meant when she said she discovered the presence of a secret commonality available to lesbians and gay men once they got over their fear of one another. I wondered: If gays and lesbians can have sex with one another and still stay gay and lesbian, what does that say about society's malice? What are liberal and conservative homophobes unnerved by?

Perhaps it's this new and remarkable separation of sexual behavior from identity — that there is something more complex to sex and love and spirituality than society's border between heterosexual and homosexual. Scholars such as Douglas Crimp and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick speak of homosexuality as a concern that extends beyond the 10 percent of Americans who identify as a sexual minority. This doesn't imply that everyone is homosexual, but that rather, like African-American culture, it's a web of feelings and ideas that runs through our books, films, music and dreams.

Still, the queering of America seems a long way off. It will be hard enough getting homosexuals to see how politically marginalized they remain. Yet Queer Nation implies that anything less than anti-homophobic soul-searching on the part of every straight is the equivalent of violence. In the five months I've attended Queer Nation meetings since the Defense March, large actions have given way to smaller, more effective ones. Membership grows steadily. It seems that gays and lesbians are no longer willing to stand for one more bludgeoned queer, one more exclusion from a rally, one more comment by Arsenio Hall. But individual zaps may not do enough. Hate crimes can't be viewed independently of a society that hates.

"The messages about homosexuals that this culture sends out through the media, religious institutions, families and educational institutions," says Gregory Herek, a U.C. Davis professor who studies gay-bashing, "is that it's 'okay' to attack this lifestyle because it is sick and immoral." As long as it's okay, Queer Nation will have to remind citizens to take responsibility for their society's heterosexism — or else. LA

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