

MEMOIR OF A RACE TRAITOR

MAB SEGREST

"Courageous and daring, this work testifies/documents the reality that political solidarity, forged in struggle, can exist across differences." — bell hooks

South End Press

1994

A Bridge, Not a Wedge

This essay was originally delivered as a keynote at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change Conference in Durham, North Carolina, in November 1993. I have elaborated the remarks to conclude this book. The reflections on the economy in the 1980s and 1990s complete the assessment of capitalism undertaken in "On Being White and Other Lies" and show the emergence of what I believe is a fourth stage, beyond commerce, industrial and finance capitalism, driven by the technological advances of the information age. The remarks on racism, while targeted to white gay and lesbian organizers, are relevant to other predominantly white movements within the United States. I have also expanded my reflections on the ways that homophobia hurts heterosexuals, especially the way that the Right is attempting to seed homophobia in communities of color. I certainly hope that homophobia will not prevent heterosexuals reading this piece from seeing its relevance to their lives.

Good morning, and welcome to Durham. Those of you making your first trip South may already be disoriented by our peculiar blend of hospitality and repression, which comes from having spent 246 of the last 374 years as a slave culture. But it's important for all of us to understand the history of racism in the United States—in which the South has played a particularly visible but by no means singular role. If coming South reminds us of this, so much the better. If the South is the cradle of the Confederacy and of many subsequent right-wing movements, it is also the mother of all resistance, the heir to generations of Africans' determination to be free, from the moment they set foot on the slave ships, all across the Middle Passage, to the long, cold, white nightmare on this continent. The South is the heir to their creativity. For however destructively white supremacist culture has defined them, African Americans have continually re-created themselves, have known in their songs and in their hearts *before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in*

my grave. I call some of their names, a verbal libation: Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer. We meet on their ground, and on the ground of Tuscaroras, Algonquins, Cherokee, Lumbee, Sioux, who fought their own wars with the U.S. Army, the long and brutal history of which should remind our movement what it means to take on the U.S. military, arguably the most repressive force in the world.

I feel honored to address you this morning, but I also feel urgent. I am afraid that I will not explain clearly enough my conviction that the gay and lesbian liberation movement must understand racism more fully if we are to survive, and that we cannot understand racism if we do not understand the anti-human virulence of capitalism. If we did understand these two great barriers to human liberation, we would behave differently—position our movement differently, structure our organizations differently, develop and respect our leaders differently. In this regard, I think we are similar to many progressive movements in the United States. But we gay people are at a critical juncture. In November 1992, Amendment 2 was passed in Colorado, prohibiting the passage of gay rights laws and repealing existing anti-discrimination ordinances in three cities. In November 1993, just last week, we lost three similar homophobic ballot initiatives—in Maine, Cincinnati and Portsmouth, New Hampshire. New Right groups in at least twelve other states plan Amendment 2-type initiatives in 1994. The demise of the Rainbow Curriculum in New York City was another frightening victory for the Right and a model of how effectively it can use homophobia and racism as a wedge between communities of color and gay and lesbian communities, limiting the aspirations both of as a result. The Right is building its base on a homophobia as volatile as the fires that recently swept through the canyons of southern California.

Yes, the gay movement has more visibility, more access to corridors of power, than we have ever had. But, unfortunately, our biggest ally, the President, is a weak man in a weak position. We have only to look at the degeneration of Clinton's honorable intent to lift the ban on gay men and lesbians in the military to the capitulation policy of "don't ask, don't tell" that still leaves lesbian and gay service people at the mercy of military intelligence. Bill Clinton will not save us. We have to "save" ourselves by organizing our own people and bringing them into

coalitions on a range of justice issues. To meet the emergencies the Right presents us will require a conceptual shift, a new paradigm to take us into a new century.

Our failure to understand racism is killing us. Maybe twenty years ago, our movement and institutions had the luxury of stupidity. Maybe twenty years go, white queers could approach issues of racism out of guilt, or a desire to be liked, or to be "good." Maybe then we could offer token jobs and token recognition to people of color, saving the decision-making, the real power, for the folks who looked like the President, or the Chief Justice, or the CEO of Exxon. But the Right has called our diversity bluff. Their most recent and effective propaganda, such as the video "Gay Rights, Civil Rights," uses African American spokespeople to proclaim that we are not a "genuine" minority in the tradition of Martin Luther King but a privileged group after "special rights." Many Black people have no illusions that the producers of this propaganda have their best interests at heart. However, these divisive strategies become most apparent as the lies they are where our movement has relationships with people of color (including those in our own midst). In all those towns and cities where there are few links between visible gay organizations and people of color, such strategies are dangerously effective among both people of color and straight whites. The wildfire of the Right's insurgent fascism is sweeping down the canyons that divide us, and we must respond to racism now for our own survival—to save our little white asses. And we should be thankful for the opportunity.

When we don't get race, it kills us. When we don't understand capitalism, not only are we more confused about race, not only do we confuse power with money, not only do we deny our clearest voices—we also fail to understand the forces driving the history of our times. We won't have successful strategies if we don't understand our times. If we don't understand why things are happening to us now, we will never have the vision and the strategy to seize the future and shape it.

Last year, as part of my new job for the Urban-Rural Mission of the World Council of Churches, I traveled to Juarez, Mexico, to visit the *maquiladoras*. Fortune 500 companies built these "twin plant" factories along the U.S.-Mexico border in the 1970s when the Mexican President, faced with mounting pressure from his country's international debt,

developed "free trade zones." (Many other Third World countries were saddled with similar huge debts when the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank encouraged them to borrow too much money. The consequence has been to keep those poor countries' people and resources at the disposal of richer countries and under the control of domestic authoritarian regimes, since democracies are less inclined to starve their people.)

In Juarez, first we toured the industrial districts, driving past rows of seemingly innocuous factories. Then we went behind one of the *maquilas*. On the other side of a drainage ditch, Mexican families lived in houses made from cardboard and scrap lumber. There was an acrid smell rising from ditch water the bright green color of astroturf. A pipe from the plant fed unprocessed waste the color and consistency of breast milk into the water. Families washed and dried their laundry in the polluted water. Our guide later showed us pictures of babies born to women maquila workers in Brownsville, Texas—babies who had no brains. The workers in these factories are 70% women.

Then we went to visit a *colonia*, a poor neighborhood that feeds workers into the maquilas. As we rounded the hill, I looked out to the horizon, and all I could see were scores of the same cardboard houses. They stretched from mesa to mesa for acres, the pattern broken only by an occasional power line or by water brought in in old chemical barrels.

There on the hill outside of Juarez, the taste of its dust in my mouth, I found myself face to face with the latest manifestation of a virulent capitalism in which masses of humanity become pawns for massive profits for a few.

What does this mean, I thought, to gay people?

While the New Right's "family values" campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s pumped up hostility against gay men and lesbians, the forces that eventually brought Reagan and Bush to the White House stole this country. Corporate profits from the postwar boom peaked in the mid-'60s, then began to decline, squeezed by increasing foreign competition from both established and newly industrializing countries. In the 1960s and '70s, the men who run the multinationals responded with mergers and hostile takeovers to try for fast profits, rather than

using the money to retool basic industries and maintain our infrastructure. They did not improve our products—how many of you began driving Volkswagens or Hondas rather than American cars in the 1970s and 1980s? Rather, they cut labor costs—by attacking unions and by sending our basic industries to Third World countries, where people work for one tenth the wages (maquila workers make \$4 a day).¹

New computer technologies have allowed this rearrangement of the global assembly line because now production and assembly of particular products can be dispersed to countries with the "comparative advantage" of cheap labor costs and lax labor and environmental standards. "Money" is reduced to electronic impulses, both highly concentrated and rapidly deployed.

Between 1970 and 1990 conservative administrations and Congress restructured our federal tax policy to provide incentives for corporations to invest overseas, decreasing the percentage of corporate taxes that constitute the total federal budget from 23.4 percent to 9.7 percent. Reagan gave so many corporations "tax expenditures"—deductions and credits—that many Fortune 500 companies stopped paying taxes altogether and even got money back from previous years. IBM paid virtually no U.S. taxes between 1986 and 1988 with U.S. assets of \$39 billion and a worldwide profit of \$26 billion.²

The people in control of our economy "deindustrialized" the United States, leaving us a service economy with lower-paying jobs. These corporate and governmental decision makers "feminized" the work force, because the way they could save the most money was by eliminating the unionized, higher salaried, white men's jobs. By 1973, the standard of living from the postwar expansion peaked, and wages began to fall. In the 1970s for the first time since World War II, the standard of living for white workers began to decline.

The New Right, which would mobilize a racist, sexist and homophobic backlash to the justice movements of the 1960s, was born just at this moment of declining white living standards. In 1973, Kevin Phillips had articulated in *The Emerging Republican Majority* the formula for forging a right-wing populism based on racist backlash to issues such as busing and affirmative action. The "New Right" movement had been brewing since Barry Goldwater's 1964 Presidential campaign brought

conservatives together and generated a mailing list. It was fed by the success of George Wallace's populist racist presidential campaigns, which garnered 10 million votes in 1968 and showed the "old Right" a way to break up the Democratic coalition that had dominated U.S. politics since the Depression. At the same time, ultraconservative strategists Howard Phillips and Paul Weyrich recruited televangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson to shape the national organizations that formed the basis for a Religious Right politicized by issues of prayer in schools, feminism and the new gay liberation movement. These two thrusts—one racist, the other based on gender and sexuality—took separate courses but sprang from the same impulse and the same ultraconservative strategy.³

While the ideologues blamed feminists, people of color, poor people and gay people for the national decline, the stage was set for business mogels to siphon off billions. In 1980, Barry Goldwater's disciple Ronald Reagan was elected President on a platform of deficit reduction. Then his administration pumped up the deficit from \$79 billion to \$155 billion and the national debt from \$1 trillion to \$2.6 trillion with inflated military spending. In 1986, 63 percent of the tax dollar (not counting trust funds such as Social Security) went to pay for past, present or future wars.⁴

While Reaganites inflated the war budget, they slashed the "safety net" that was put in place in the 1930s and 1960s to protect us from the ravages of unrestrained capitalism. The federal government cut federal social spending and passed on insufficient bloc grants to the states. Cities cut taxes to draw investments and concentrated on service, not manufacturing jobs, then, many went bankrupt in the 1980s under the double pressure of increased responsibility for social services and a reduced tax base. States became the managers of social spending and in the 1990s will increasingly face bankruptcy under this pressure. In 1991, New York carried a \$6 billion deficit, California \$10 billion. Then there is the savings and loan scam, which is costing us \$100 billion a year. The United States in the 1990s is facing the kind of "structural adjustment" economic policies that we have long foisted on Third World countries, likely with the attendant volatile social movements and beefed up police state to repress them.⁵

The collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s (due in part to its own massive military spending) has left capitalism without the coun-

terforce that the U.S.S.R. offered for the past seventy years, speeding up the process of economic integration of global markets as three huge trading blocs have emerged: in the Pacific Rim (dominated by Japan), in Europe (dominated by Germany) and in the Americas (dominated by the United States). The situation in the maquilas is one result of the policy of deindustrialization and hemispheric economic integration that U.S. economic elites helped to put in place with the political support of the same white workers they have begun to dislocate; and with the passage of the North American Free Trade Act, the maquila economy will spread to all of Mexico, and eventually all of Latin America and back north.

With the communist threat suddenly diminished, the Bush administration dropped a lot of its military hardware on the unfortunate people of Iraq in half-million dollar smart bombs over Baghdad—with every bomb, BAM! another school, BAM! another AIDS research project, BAM! BAM! bridges and sewer systems, BAM! low-income housing complexes. We also killed 200,000 people.

In the 1990s, expect many more politicians to blame crises in the economy on our most vulnerable people, such as "welfare mothers," "illegal immigrants" and "homosexuals wanting special rights." Suddenly, there is not enough money for baby formula, supposedly because welfare mothers are having too many children. States are making massive, homicidal cuts in public assistance: currently in Pennsylvania the proposed cut is one quarter million people, mostly women and children. White workers are facing hard times, many people repeat the lie planted by ultraconservative strategists, because affirmative action is giving people of color all the good jobs—when actually the "good jobs" are disappearing altogether. The United States has lost 2.6 million manufacturing jobs since 1978.⁶ In 1986, the median income of a white family was almost double that of a Black family.⁷

How does this economic stuff affect us as gay people? Pitiful funding for AIDS and breast cancer is an obvious answer, but let's look deeper. Since we are meeting in Durham, let's consider where homophobia fits into the social and economic fabric of this city and state. You are meeting in Buck Duke's town—James B. Duke, 19th-century tobacco baron, built his fortune by teaching the world to smoke his cigarettes. If you walk a block east up Chapel Hill Street, you come to the Post

Office. In the tobacco heyday of Durham it sold \$1 million a day in revenue stamps for the 90 million packs of cigarettes shipped out each day from Durham's tobacco factories.

If you go in the other direction past Brightleaf Square (tobacco warehouses converted to shops and restaurants) you come to Ninth Street—bookstores, lesbian ice cream, a great bakery and, across the street, expensive condos. They used to be Erwin Mills, one of the many textile mills built at the turn of the century in the rapidly industrializing South. These factories had prospered by drawing poor whites off of depressed farms for low wages and white privilege. Many jobs came to these Southern textile mills from the northeast because the South had cheaper wages than unionized northern shops. In the 1930s, strikes all across the Southeast were brutally repressed by companies, governors and the National Guard. In the past fifteen years, we have lost many of these jobs to automation or to even cheaper labor in Third World countries, where the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the U.S. military have maintained poverty conditions and a ready workforce—as similar forces did in North Carolina.

Lesbian and gay male professionals working in the universities and medical and research facilities of the Triangle have benefited from this new wave of development. At the same time, a cadre of sometimes marginally employed gay and lesbian activists such as myself have shaped a largely middle class movement that does not include many of the "queers" working in the mills and factories and convenience stores whose low wages make North Carolina a state of the "working poor."

In 1990, North Carolina ranked 46th of 50 in overall labor climate from the workers' perspective—and number one in labor market opportunities, from the perspective of the employer, according to the Southern Labor Institute. This month, *Fortune* named Durham-Chapel Hill-Raleigh as the best place to do business in the United States.⁸ Yet one third of Durham's families live in poverty, and these are mostly Black, mostly female-headed households.

Walking southeast several blocks from the Omni where we meet today, you come upon the massive construction for Durham's new jail. Governor Jim Hunt has called a special session of the legislature in

1994, which is considering a \$200 million bond initiative for building new prisons that will cost \$100 million a year to maintain.

Now some of you may be thinking, why is she going on so about Durham and North Carolina? What is all this economics? I'm just here for the weekend. So let me approach it another way. If you have concerns about Jesse Helms and the havoc he wreaks for lesbians and gay men—his attack on the National Endowment for the Arts for its support of "homosexual art," his demonization of us, his attacks on AIDS funding or just for aesthetic reasons—if you care about Jesse Helms, then you care about these conditions in North Carolina. North Carolina created Helms because hard times create demagogues everywhere. Helms came to his homophobia relatively late (the 1978 Senate race). He cut his political teeth on the anti-communism of the 1950s working in Willis Smith's no-holds-barred Senate race against Chapel Hill liberal Frank Porter Graham. He gained a following in the 1960s as a television commentator defending segregation. Every six years, he wins his Senate seat again by a two to three percent swing vote, drawn from his base of free-enterprise Republicans (owners of factories and mills), middle-class religious conservatives and the working-class whites whose economic interests he seldom serves. Economic conditions like we have had for much of this century in North Carolina are creating others like Helms all across the country.

Similar circumstances in Virginia have bred Pat Robertson of the Christian Coalition and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and a Religious Right that draws on deep regional roots. You are meeting in the Bible Belt, but originally it was those folks in Massachusetts who were the theocrats, who were burning women as witches and merging government with their Fuhrer's version of God. Thomas Jefferson, the slave-master from Virginia, insisted on the separation of church and state. But in the three decades before the Civil War, the South called on all its institutions to defend slavery against growing opposition. Under this pressure, government merged with reactionary religion in this repressive way as slavemasters quoted the Bible to maintain their way of life. Now the Virginia-based Christian Coalition's 386 radio stations reach all over the globe.⁹

As the South goes, so goes the nation. As North Carolina (the most industrialized state in the country, losing jobs to automation and

"economic integration") goes, so goes your state. And the real problem, with this region and this country, is that slavery was never really abolished. It just got reinstituted in other forms: Jim Crow, sharecropping, subsistence "wage labor" jobs for people of color that often amount to involuntary servitude. Today's proposals for "free enterprise zones" in blighted and abandoned cities and even "don't ask, don't tell" are descended from the heinous logic of biological and social superiority and an economic system that requires a dehumanized category of workers to reap its profits. We gay men and lesbians should not be surprised when this country does not treat us well.

We can meet till the cows come home and discuss how to "Fight the Right" without recognizing that in some cases we *are* the Right. Lance Hill, who directed the Louisiana campaigns against neo-Nazi David Duke's candidacies, told me that Duke's campaign for Governor in 1990 was active in the gay bars of the French Quarter in New Orleans. Neo-Nazis could have access there because those bars are largely segregated.¹⁰ I offer this example not to say that Louisiana is an anomaly, but to say that the Duke campaign brought out a weakness of gay movements in most cities. We gay people look with justified concern at the way the Religious Right uses homophobia to divide, for example, the African American community, to persuade some of its church people to organize against us to their own detriment and destruction. We need to look with equal concern at the practices of our movement, our community, which are also the dry wood on which fascism burns. For many gay and lesbian people of color, it is every bit as much an expense of spirit to be in a room with us radical queer white activists as with the most hair-raising fundamentalist minister—just as exhausting and insulting. We can no longer take for granted the presence of our brothers and sisters of color among us, their talents and their resources. The arsonists of the Christian Coalition have lit their fires, and the hot winds are rising.

As we go on the defensive, state-by-state, fighting the religious bigots, we should seriously consider the possibility that it's not the men (or women) who can write checks for \$100,000, \$500,000 or \$1 million, who know most strategically how to spend that money. Maybe acquiring that much money has buffered these people from the need to come together with the broadest range of people. Yes, we need

"powerful allies." But we must always ask ourselves how this power is constituted. A Congressperson may have debts to liberal donors, but popular conservatism can cancel that debt at any moment.

The demographics of the United States will shift radically over the next half-century, fed by Latino immigrants from war-torn and economically ravaged Central American countries; Asians who began to immigrate in greater numbers when Congress repealed racist immigration quotas during the Viet Nam War; and declining white birth rates. By the middle of the next century, there will be as many people of color in this country as white people. We lesbians and gay men will have a chance to build a potentially new kind of power base at the local, state and national level with progressive people of color, marginalized workers both within and outside of unions and progressive feminists. Will our racism allow us to make that choice? (Feminists will face similar decisions, and we are already seeing the emergence of a right-wing feminism as well as the cultivation of right-wing Black leadership such as Clarence Thomas and General Colin Powell.) As we walk the corridors of power, it may be not our lobbyists, our congresspeople, the queer members of a Democratic administration who carry our hopes of success. It may be the unseen lesbian secretaries and gay janitors, the Black Congressional Caucus and the National Conference of Mayors who are as much the source of our power.

Many of these people know that no movement or person in this country can escape the repression and dehumanization that was required for the genocide of Native peoples and the enslavement of Africans. That's what we fight when we "Fight the Right." Let our presence in the South this weekend remind us of that. The only "special right" that the United States gives to minorities is the Right to be the target of genocidal policies. We have only to look at AIDS policy to confirm this truth. Just as we do not want people of color buying the Right's homophobic argument that we are after "special rights," not civil rights, it is also vital that our movement does not buy the racist backlash to affirmative action propagated over the last two decades by the same Republican forces. When we put both parts of their strategy together, it's clear that, to them, *all* civil rights are "special rights" that victimize privileged white men.¹¹ When any "minority," whether racial, ethnic, gendered or sexual, buys into these wedge strategies, we play ourselves

for fools and disrupt the possibility of a transformative political majority in the next century.

It's my belief that racism shapes all political movements in the United States, for better and for worse, but because white people so seldom talk about how we are affected by racism, we don't understand how to counter it. We just act it out. In the lesbian and gay movement, much of our analysis has flowed from an understanding of gender, leaving race and class at two removes from our analysis. But approaches to racism have shaped the debates within our own community on issues such as passing and assimilation, radical transformation versus reform, legal strategies versus empowerment of the grassroots. One of the dominant paradigms for dealing with race in the twentieth century emerged from the University of Chicago in the 1920s. It was called the ethnicity model, and it theorized that immigrants to the U.S. go through cycles of contact and conflict then assimilation.¹² Now this theory, on the one hand, was an improvement over the dominant paradigm it replaced, which was the biological approach to race, that saw racial differences as inherited and that justified slavery and colonialism. (This context should make us beware of the biological theories of homosexuality now being advanced.)

But the ethnicity paradigm was based on European experience, not the experiences of people of color. At the same time that European immigrants were being assimilated—if painfully—into our economy, Jim Crow reigned in the South for African Americans, Asians were kept out of the country altogether by immigration quotas, Native Americans were suffering record rates of poverty on a land base once again decimated by white theft, and Chicanas were forming their own *mutualistas* in the Southwest in the face of racist white unions. So this business of assimilation operates differently above and below the color lines, as do most manifestations of American “democracy.” If we generic gay and lesbian whitefolks set as our movement's goal being assimilated into American culture, getting “our piece of the pie,” we ignore or deny the reality that gay and lesbian people of color will never be assimilated in the same way within this system because it was constituted to exclude them. And, as Derrick Bell has argued in reference to African-American liberation, and as Colorado proved in regard to gay civil rights,

wherever assimilation goals may become enshrined in law, they can just as easily be overturned.¹³

If we follow the ethnicity theory, we perpetuate the belief that the issue of “homophobia” is mainly a matter of personal prejudice, which contact with us will diffuse. We ignore the extent to which the most powerful political and economic forces in this country have an investment in our degradation. Literally, right-wing groups invest millions in slandering us, knowing that these efforts will build up their grassroots base and their funding chests. In the Oregon Citizen's Alliance campaign, they put back into their vicious homophobic ballot initiative campaign only one dollar out of every three raised. The rest of the money, according to the Task Force's Fight the Right organizer Scot Nakagawa, went into a range of regressive causes. Such campaigns also distract people from the corporate theft that may beggar us all.

The assimilation model leads us to try to smooth the rough edges of our community, putting limits on visible leadership by people of color, working-class white gay men and lesbians and anyone else who doesn't look and act like most lobbyists. It leads to “outing” powerful, rich people to show that they, too, are gay. It leads to surveys that tout the marketing power of the gay dollar and position us as a movement of the middle to upper class, with higher than average spending power. This dynamic sets us up to be a “buffer class,” in a similar way that Jews were portrayed in Europe, to draw off class anger from the economic elite who are really making the decisions and reaping the rewards in a period of national economic crisis and decline. It makes us appear narrow and selfish (which I do not think we are) and cuts us off from allies, increasing our vulnerability to insurgent right-wing populist movements agitated by economic unrest. This is classic fascism, and its foundation has already been laid in our time and out nation.¹⁴

The two models of race thinking that emerged to counter the ethnicity model were nationalism and socialism. I would argue that we have opted for the wrong model. We don't need a queer nationalism—as powerful as the militancy and anti-assimilationist stances of Queer Nation have been. We need a queer socialism that is by necessity anti-racist, feminist and democratic; a politics that does not cut us off from other people, but that unites us with them in the broadest possible

movement. Now I live in a state where folks shoot both "commies" and "queers," so I had better explain first what I do *not* mean by socialism: I don't mean the KGB or the Berlin Wall or Stalin's *gulags* or the repression of spirituality or creativity or initiative. What I really mean is a more genuine *democracy*, where the citizens of our country have more direct access to *all* the decisions that affect us, not only in the political but also in the economic arena. (The NAFTA vote was important because it offered a rare occasion where the U.S. Congress got to vote on what multinational corporations do.) What I mean is a less *lonely* society, where we think collectively about resources for the common good, rather than struggling individually against each other for material and psychic survival. What I mean is a more humane society, where our driving motive is abundant life for all rather than increasing extravagance for a few and suffering for many more. Nor do I think there is presently any complete blueprint for how this political and economic democracy would occur in the United States. We are called on to invent it, as the "New Left" set out to do thirty years ago.

With the collapse of socialist governments around the world, we are called on to reinvent the movements for a society, in Margaret Randall's words, where "everyone contributes and everyone is cared for." Randall feels that many of these socialist movements failed because they would not develop a feminist agenda. Queer socialism would occur within a profoundly feminist revolutionary context, defined by Randall as "a feminist discourse based on an ideology embracing democratic relations of power, a redefinition of history and of memory, and a world view that favors life over the signs of imminent death that we experience on so many fronts."¹⁵

This Queer Socialism of a "newer Left" would recognize the damage done by 500 years of colonial rule. People of color have suffered for 500 years from the European/Christian war between mind and body, soul and body, projected onto all women and onto cultures that often had more holistic worldviews and darker skins. The mind/body split allows the 100 white men owning poultry plants in Mississippi to tell the Black women workers, "we only want your bodies, not your minds" as those men lock the women into plants where 27 out of 30 in one factory acquired carpal-tunnel syndrome.¹⁶ It generates rape and devastating physical and psychological violence against women. It also

defines gay men and lesbians in this period as only perverse bodies engaged in sinful/sick/illegal physical acts, as "abominations." And it discards the old and the disabled. When we lesbians and gay men see that Black women in Mississippi poultry plants and Mexican women in maquilas are also defined as only bodies, to be used and discarded, machines without feelings and souls, we can understand more fully how our fates are implicated in theirs. When we don't respond to others being hurt by similar forces, how can we expect them to respond to our crises and pains? As Rabbi Hillel taught 2,000 years ago, "If we are not for ourselves, who will be for us? [But] if we are not for others, who are we?"

As Queer Socialists we would bring our insights and strengths to a range of progressive struggles. A Queer Socialism would be inevitably inflected for gender, would have our anger and our militancy, our humor and our flair, and would shape a movement that includes gay and lesbian homeless people, many of them cross-dressers and many, people of color. We know that in some cultures that do not hate the body, the male and female principles are not so much at war as they are in this culture, and that gender-transgressive people like the *berdache* in American Indian societies are considered holy people—as we are holy people. A Queer Socialism would clarify our roles as workers, as "means of production." But we gay people also bring the knowledge that humans are not only "means of production," however much capitalism seeks to define us that way. We know and insist that our needs include not only the survival needs of food, shelter, health care and clothing, but also dignity, pleasure, intimacy and love.

In adding our lavender stripe to the rainbow, we bring our grief and our creativity in the too-familiar face of death. I have watched my gay brothers care for one another to the grave, joined in their care, of course, by lesbians and heterosexuals. I've been around a good bit, and I have not witnessed this particular tender brotherhood in the face of disease and death in other places in the same way. Many of these are white men, middle-class men, who have taught me about courage and compassion. None of what I urge here is about categories we cannot escape. It is about who we choose to be.

Gay men and lesbians also bring the ability to create familial love that does not depend on biology, on the worship of our own gene

pools. Those non-biological parents among us know that we can love and parent any child—it mainly requires our rapt attention to an unfolding wonder—and that the children in the inner cities, the babies born in the maquilas, are also our children. As an African proverb teaches, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” These days, it must take a whole country unwilling to write off any of its young.

A Queer Socialism would not be provincially urban. It would recognize that the most crucial battles for gay/lesbian politics in the next decade will not be in the cities where we have our power base, where most of our people are concentrated. The Right has finally figured out to take us on their turf, not ours. These battles will be in areas that are more rural and historically more conservative. In those areas, we will develop new models not dependent on a critical gay mass and gay infrastructure. We will create broad-based movements against homophobia and all forms of social injustice rather than movements only for gay and lesbian rights. These movements will hold heterosexuals accountable for heterosexism, generating heterosexual allies, then trusting them to do their jobs. The trust we will gain through this process is one of the opportunities within the crisis. Heterosexuals will increasingly learn how their fates are implicated in ours, how homophobia erodes their most intimate relationships and corrupts their institutions, building repression into our military, fear into our schools’ quest for understanding and knowledge, and mean-spiritedness into proclamations of love from churches, mosques and synagogues. If the Religious Right has its way, they will use homophobia as an ax against the very taproot of this country’s democratic potential, the revolutionary concept of human dignity and equality.

In my vision of a reinvigorated movement, the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force would take a stand on major issues of our time, such as the North American Free Trade Act: against NAFTA and in solidarity with working people, who are most of our people; in recognition that unemployed people (whose numbers NAFTA will increase) are six times more likely to commit acts of violence than people who are employed, and some of that will be hate violence; and in recognition that NAFTA will override our national and local laws on labor and environmental standards (as “unfair labor practices”), constricting once again this country’s democratic possibilities.

In my movement, the Task Force would call up Ben Chavis, the new NAACP Director, and say, “Rev. Chavis, thank you for your support of the March on Washington”—for which he came under serious attack from within his own organization—and we’d like to return the favor.” We’d say, “The next time a big vote on racism comes up in Congress, we’ll be there with you, with our 100,000 members and \$4 million budget, because we appreciate your help and because that’s about our people, too.” My movement would not avoid these stands for fear it would divide our constituency—which is already divided; it would take leadership stands to unite us around broader principles.

In *our* movement, we see the opportunity in the crisis to do what we should have done twenty-five years ago: increase our determination to keep faith with one another by not tolerating racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, ageism, the fear and neglect of the disabled or class divisions in ourselves or in our organizations.

In our movement we don’t panic or blame ourselves, we stay accountable and take the long view. The Quincentenary of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas gave us the opportunity to reflect on 500 years of resistance. The people of color among us let us know that this is not a decade’s or even a lifetime’s struggle. If we sacrifice our relationships to immediate victories, we will lose in the long haul. How we treat one another matters more than any particular “win” because our goal is a transformed culture, which also requires transformed human relationships.

In our movement, we seize the opportunity to face our own self-destructive fears and isolations in the messages of the Right, and to stare them down. As Creek poet Joy Harjo wrote:

Oh, you have choked me, but I gave you the leash,
You have gutted me, but I gave you the knife,
You have devoured me, but I gave you the heated thing.
I take myself back, fear.¹⁷

In our movement, we claim no more or less than our human place among the creatures on the planet. Queer Socialism moves us to the post-Queer.

This re-energized movement will be, in Suzanne Pharr’s eloquent terms, “not a wedge, but a bridge”; not a point of division, but of

expansion and connection. To those who insist on denying us our full humanity, we will insist on the sacred humanity of all people. *A bridge, not a wedge. A bridge, not a wedge.* It has a nice *ring* to it. We can say it like a mantra when we feel the Right getting too hot. Folks from San Francisco can help us in this imaging—all those bays, all that steel hanging up in the air and people got the nerve to drive across it. How does it stay up there, anyway, across the blue expanse?

Yes, the fires are burning. But think of all that water.

And, even in a hot wind, bridges will sing.

A Bridge, Not a Wedge

1. Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 8-11.
2. Ellen Teninty, "Corporate Taxes: The Return for Our Public Investment," *Equal Means*, Fall 1993, 28-29.
3. For the origins of the New Right and the Religious Right, see "The New Right and the Christian Right" in the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's *Fight the Right Action Kit*, 1734 14th Street NW, Washington, DC 20009; 202-332-6483; see also *The Public Eye*, the newsletter of Political Research Associates, 678 Massachusetts, Suite 702, Cambridge, MA 02139; especially "Constructing Homophobia," March 1993.
4. War Resisters' League *Guide to War Tax Resistance* (New York, War Resisters' League, 1986), 21.
5. See the work of the Federation of Industrial Retention and Renewal (3411 West Diversey, Room 10, Chicago, IL 60647; (312) 278-5418).
6. *Free Trade Mailing*, newsletter of the North American Worker-to-Worker Network, Durham, North Carolina, February 1993, 6.
7. *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society*, a publication of the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1990), introduction.
8. "Best Cities for Business," *USA Today*, October 27, 1993.
9. See "The Christian Coalition" in NGLTF's *Fight the Right Action Kit*.
10. At the conference, one gay man from New Orleans disagreed with this information, but a lesbian verified it as true from her experience handing out anti-Duke literature in the French Quarter.
11. Suzanne Pharr and Scot Nakagawa have done pioneering analysis and organizing against the Religious Right; see their articles in *Fight the Right Action Kit* and Pharr's analysis in the 1992 and 1993 copies of *Transformation*, a newsletter of the Women's Project, 2224 Main Street, Little Rock, AR 72206.

12. Omi and Winant, 11-25.
13. Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
14. Russ Bellant in *Old Nazis, the New Right and the Republican Party* (Boston: South End Press, 1991) describes other characteristics of facism: the use of violence to impose views on others and the dehumanizing and scapegoating of "enemies" as subhuman and conspiratorial; a cult of personality around a charismatic leader or elite whose authoritarian power replaces constitutional government; these leaders' exhortations for the masses to join a heroic mission, including appeals to the working class or farmers; abandonment of working class alliances by ultimately forging an alliance with the elite, and the abandonment of any consistent ideology in the drive for state power. See also Segrest and Zeskind, *Quarantines and Death*, 22-23.
15. Margaret Randall, *Gathering Rage: The Failure of 20th Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992), 113. Randall enumerates other of "socialism's errors": "The treatment of certain unexamined beliefs as if they were an immutable science, a self-induced blindness toward, and fear of, groups whose liberation struggles threaten traditional leadership (notably women and gays), duplicity in terms of the internal line on the one hand and what you tell the people you're organizing on the other, a democratic centralism that retains all of the centralism and little of the democracy, personality cults, new class privilege, cronyism, and much else," 116.
16. *Building Just Relationships for the Next 500 Years*, report of the Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network Gathering, September 1992; prepared by Southerners for Economic Justice, P.O. Box 240, Durham, NC 27702; available for \$10. I am indebted to SEJ and Leah Wise for much of my understanding of the contemporary economy.
17. Joy Harjo, "I Give You Back," *She Had Some Horses* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1983), 74.