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'Pride' and prejudice

Parade flap reflects gay community's tension over how it presents itself in era of stereotypes

BY E. J. GRAFF

IT'S A QUESTION THAT ARISES EVERY June: Why must some people in the Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade look so ... so queer? This week, the question was sparked by two provocative displays: a float with two topless women aboard pretending to make love, and an all-but-naked man on stilts - this out of a gathering of 150,000 at last weekend's event in Boston. In past years, the city has buzzed about those in outre clothes - drag queens flashing fishnetted legs and women in black bras and leather vests revving motorcycles.

Too often, the question's implication is that everyone in the lesbian and gay communities is represented by whoever is least socially acceptable, as if one male flasher trumped thousands of Gap-attired dads and moms.

But replace the word "gay" with "straight" and see how it stands up. Does one (straight) male flasher represent thousands of (straight) polite dads? Do two barely dressed (straight)

women flashing their nipples on a fashion runway stand for all those (straight) women otherwise disguised as harried teachers or grocery cashiers?

Society debates - privately as well as politically - its current standard for civil public behavior, a standard that changes with each era. If our polis can hold 95 percent of society to that standard, we are generally satisfied. Then we scorn or cheer or incarcerate, according to our temperaments and laws, those who insist on flouting, flaunting and flashing.

Of course, society always holds minority groups to a stricter standard. There must be an anthropological answer to why throughout history groups that are despised are regularly charged with being sexually out of control, be they Germany's Jews, colonized blacks, or immigrant Catholics.

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gay men is what stands out as different, it's particularly easy to single out that flasher, and snicker that those homos really are queer.

As a result, how the community presents itself is debated in every possible forum. That debate has raged these last few days, in the wake of last Saturday's parade.

At one end are the liberationists who - as in many minority groups - express defiance by flaunting whatever aspect of the group is most hated. Among lesbians and gay men, that starts with claiming words like "queer," "faggot" and "dyke." It sometimes continues with an insistent sexual display, a combination of long-suppressed fury and exultant celebration of accepting one's sexual identity. Such an approach was most widely accepted in the movement's early years, when the community as a whole was just escaping hatred's thrall.

But some gay men and lesbians fool themselves into believing that being sexually "in your face" is activism instead of acting out. (What they consider "radical" is really only a variation on the consumer culture's constant peddling of desire.) They often outgrow that attitude as they become more comfortable with their sexuality. But since new people are always coming out, the impulse remains a kind of standing wave within the lesbian and gay communities.

The Lesbian Avengers' rolling bed - which crashed the parade without permission, in keeping with the group's high-spirited guerrilla approach - was this year's version of the impulse to substitute stylized confrontation for political discussion.

Then there are the bacchanalians, the party boys and girls, who think it's enough just to have a wild time. A wild time, indeed, is what some of them insist being gay is about, as if they'd listened too long to the Christian Coalition talking about uncontrolled perversion. Drowning the memory of all those slurs and catcalls (sometimes from one's own family) may involve endless dancing, drinking and drugs, common enough escape routes.

These folks can be found gyrating on the parade's bar floats - until some show up, several years later, in

the sober contingent. Some, of course, are slightly mentally disturbed, as might be suspected of the bare-genitaliaed man on stilts. But parades and public gatherings often bring out the wilder side of human nature.

Taking this particular standing wave as representative of all lesbian and gay lives is as mistaken as believing that Mardi Gras represents Catholicism, or that straight men who spend all their money in the Combat Zone represent all straight male sexuality. Synecdoche - letting the part stand for the whole - may be good literary technique, but it's bad social analysis.

This interpretation makes the assimilationists wince. This week's edition of Bay Windows, a moderately conservative Boston gay newsweekly, gives 90 percent of its opinion space to excoriating the Lesbian Avengers and the stilt walker. That includes the editor's signed piece and all but one of its letters to the editor. (The remaining letter is by one of the Avengers, thumping the group's dogma.)

In recent books such as "A Place at the Table," the assimilationists demand a homogenized public image, sanitized of anything that's not middle (or upper-middle) class, as if everyone at "Pride" had just stepped out of a Brattle Street garden party. Some would even like to erase all those whose gendered appearance contrasts with what's expected from their biological sex - although most lesbians and gay men have come to understand that gender variation is an impulse as genuine as and separate from (although occasionally overlapping with) same-sex orientation.

Given that the entire group's public image is at stake, why can't lesbians and gay men police the Pride parade?

The answer is, it's not possible. Imagine trying to gather one heterosexual from every ZIP code in the United States - people with nothing else in common except sexual orientation - under a single banner to celebrate their loves and desires. Imagine getting every faction - Republicans, Democrats, Lyndon LaRouchists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Tarot readers, Hassidim, teachers, currency traders, migrant workers - to agree on what "respectable" or "political efficacy" means. That's the Sisyphean task that faces each year's Pride Committee.

Besides, a "public relations" patrol has been tried.



The country's first homophile marches, as they were then called, started in 1965. The pioneering Mattachine Society (a gay men's group) and Daughters of Bilitis (a lesbian group) bussed 20 or 30 or 70 people a year to Philadelphia's Independence Hall and to the White House every July 4th, picketing against discrimination in federal employment.

Men had to wear suits and ties, women skirts and pumps. Once, the organizers actually pulled a man wearing sneakers out of the picket line. Those who argued that numbers would speak more powerfully than sartorial respectability were voted down - until Stonewall.

On June 26, 1969, a group of police conducted a standard raid on a Greenwich Village gay men's bar called the Stonewall Inn. For the first time, bar patrons fought back - with three days of bottle-throwing, street-trashing and fire-setting. Stonewall, an extremely dingy bar, hosted people as various as street-hustler/drag-queen Sylvia Rivera and, in the next room, what historian Martin Duberman called "the chino and penny-loafer crowd." One Yippie tried unsuccessfully to drag new left comrades into the fray.

Stonewall's riot has been commemorated ever since with Pride marches in cities worldwide. As each year's Pride discussion reveals, Stonewall didn't put a stop to image skirmishing. Listened to with the right attitude, the entire debate is quite entertaining, as each faction insists that its preferred presentation and ideology is the "real" spirit of Stonewall and Pride. But the "real" spirit of those 1969 riots - like Pride parades today - was wildly pluralist.

Every bit of that variety - and more - was visible at this year's Pride march. In the tradition of Sylvia, there was a floatful of participants imitating the drag queen Divine, meta-drag just begging to be an academic thesis topic; instead of the Yippie, there were Lesbian Avengers; instead of Mattachine, there were such groups as the Log Cabin Club and the Episcopalian gay group Integrity - joined by Bishop Walter Righter, who recently triumphed against a charge of heresy for ordain-

ing a coupled gay man, and whose surprise appearance was widely cheered.

No longer need anyone walk (as people actually did in the first 1970 Christopher Street Parade) with bags over their heads, fearing arrest. Indeed, as lesbians and gay men have less to lose by being open, Pride parades have expanded to include more from the mainstream, including employee, religious and student groups, and more.

Widening acceptance has in turn affected the community's outlook. One result is what's awkwardly called the "gayby boom," with a surge of "out" lesbians and gay men choosing to have children, many now at that curious age where they ask startling questions. Some parents worry about having to shield children's eyes at Pride. The new parents' more urgent stake in enforcing social decorum may begin to mellow the parade as a whole.

But not entirely. Pride brings everyone out in full bloom, as it should. Lesbians and gay men, unlike many minority communities, have no home neighborhood. That makes Pride a kind of annual Brigadoon, a village convened just for one day. As in any village, tensions simmer.

Those tensions are now showing; certain political alliances are cracking even as you read, with the Lesbian Avengers planning protests against the Pride Committee's apology for "inappropriate and unlawful behavior." Perhaps it's inevitable that the lesbian and gay communities' shift into the mainstream should be accompanied by such seismic tremors. Not only society in general, but also its many microcosms, regularly renegotiate public standards.

Pride is too many things wrapped into one to ever be made homogeneous. It's part political convention, part coming-out party, part community reunion. And while that does not excuse uncivil behavior that, among heterosexuals, would be banned from Boston streets, the event will remain as pluralist, as boring, as outrageous, as contested as everything else in our turbulent nation.

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