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DYKES AND FAGS WANT TO KNOW

*A Written Interview with
Lesbian Political Prisoners:
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& Susan Rosenberg*

Queers United in Support of Political Prisoners

-- objectification/sexual stereotypes/misogyny not only destroy us in the world, they corrode our own hearts. I am not interested in a society that promotes those things. Although I don't believe that they will be ended until we decide to end them -- they cannot be overturned through the law of this state.

I'm an activist, why haven't I heard of you before?

LAURA: I think it's because there's been a long time during which the "left" and progressive movements haven't really tried to know who's in prison -- including but not limited to political prisoners and POW's. For instance, how many AIDS activists know about the many PWA's in prison, and the horrible conditions they live in? Aside from Mike Riegle at GCN (Gay Community News), how many writers and media folks in our movements try to reach into the prisons to support lesbian and gay prisoners, whose lives are often made pretty rough by the pigs. In general, this country tries to shut prisoners away and make people outside forget about us. In the case of political prisoners, multiply that times X for the simple fact that our existence is a danger to the smooth, quiet running of the system: our existence shows that this great demokkkkracy is a lie. The government doesn't want you to know who we are -- that's why they try so hard to label us "terrorists" and "criminals".

LINDA: Political prisoners have been purposely "disappeared" by the u.s. government, whose official position is that "there are no political prisoners inside the u.s." This is the way that the government denies both that the motivations for our actions were political and that the movements we come from are legitimate, popular movements for social change. The prison system isolates all prisoners from their communities, but especially harsh isolation is instituted against political prisoners: restricted visiting lists, frequent transfers to prisons far away from our home communities, mail censorship, "maximum security conditions", long periods of time in solitary confinement.

But our own political movement, too, has ignored the existence of political prisoners. I think this has largely been a product of racism -- most U.S. political prisoners/POW's are Black and Puerto Rican comrades who have been locked up for over a decade. Unfortunately there has never been widespread support among progressive white people for the Black Liberation struggle, for Puerto Rican independence, or for Native American sovereignty struggles -- and these are the movements that the Black/Puerto Rican/Native American political prisoners/POW's come from.

Also, many political activists have actually withheld support for political prisoners/POW's because of disagreements with tactics that were employed, or with actions of which the political prisoners have been accused or convicted. These disagreements are tactical in nature, and shouldn't be allowed to obscure the fact that we all have been fighting for justice and social change. This withdrawal of support leads to false divisions amongst us, and actually helps the state in its strategy to isolate political prisoners/POW's from our communities and political movements.

SUSAN: The activists/radicals of the late 1980's and 1990's have to reclaim the history of resistance that emerged and continued through the 1970's and 80's. As long as the government and mass media get to define who

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and what is important then the real lessons contained in ours and others experiences will get lost. People haven't heard of us (except as a vague memory of a headline -- if that) because there is a very serious government counter-insurgency strategy to bury the revolutionaries who have been captured in prison. I have been in prison 6 years and over half of that time was spent in solitary confinement or small-group isolation 1000's of miles away from my community and family. My experience is similar to the 100/150 other political prisoners in the U.S. If the individuals from different movements (i.e., the Black, Puerto Rican, Native American and white movements who have seen the need for organized resistance to oppression) are destroyed it is a way to delegitimize the demands of the movements.

Did you do it? Did the government misrepresent what you did? If so, how?

LAURA: Yes, I did it! I did (do) resist racism, sexism, imperialism with every fiber of my queer being, and I believe we need to fight for justice. The government's "version" of what I/we did is a complete lie, though, in that they call resistance a crime. It's sort of like the way Jesse Helms calls us "sick" -- he's as sick as you can get. On the morality meter he doesn't even make the needle move. Same way the U.S. government, a genocidal system, calls acts of revolutionary struggle "terrorist violence", and their system of law, "justice".

LINDA: Yes, I'm proud that I've been part of the struggle to build an armed clandestine resistance movement that can fight to support national liberation struggles, and that will fight for revolution in the U.S. Of course the government misrepresented what we did first of all by calling us "terrorists" to make people think we were a danger to the community, as if our purpose was to terrorize or kill people. Quite the contrary: all the armed actions of the last 20 years have been planned to minimize any risk of human life. This, of course, is in stark contrast to the actions of the terrorist government, which is responsible world-wide for supporting death squads and mercenary armies like the contras and Savimbi's UNITA in Angola, which supports the Israeli war of genocide against the Palestinians and the brutal system of apartheid, and which supports daily police brutality in Black and Third World communities here, even such acts as the aerial bombing of MOVE in Philadelphia in 1985, which killed 11 people and created a firestorm that left over 250 people homeless.

SUSAN: I have been a revolutionary for much of my life. A revolutionary in the sense that I believe in the need for profound social change that goes to the roots of the problem. Which I believe is systemic. Consequently I have along with others tried many methods of struggle to enact a strategy to win liberation and attack the state (government) as representative of the system. First as a peace activist in the late 60's, then as a political activist in the 70's, and then in joining the armed clandestine resistance movement that was developing in the 80's. I am guilty of revolutionary anti-imperial-

SUSAN: Well! I struggle against racism in every way I can. I have learned patience, and how to be quiet, and how to really listen to who is talking, and what they are saying.

What observations or advice do you have for lesbian/gay and AIDS activists as we start to experience police surveillance, harassment and abuse?

LAURA: Fight it. Don't back away. Develop clandestine ways of operating so that the state won't know everything that you're doing. Support one another so that, when anyone is targeted for state attack, they can resist -- that resistance will build us all. Don't ever give information -- even if you think it's "safe" information -- to the state. Don't let the state divide the movement by calling some groups "legitimate" and others not. Unity is our strength. Support other movements and people who are also targets of state attack. When the state calls someone a "terrorist", or "violent", or "crazy", or anything, think hard before ever believing it to be true. Resist. Resist. Resist.

LINDA: Be cool. Develop a clandestine consciousness. Value your work enough that you don't talk to the enemy about it (like over tapped phones). Don't underestimate the power and viciousness of the state, and don't expect white privilege to make you exempt from repression. Take the lessons of past repression against political movements seriously -- not to demobilize you or make you afraid, but to safeguard and defend your work. Remember you're building for the future, not just for today, and keep struggling to broaden your vision. Remember that reforms are only temporary concessions, that they're neither permanent nor do they really solve fundamental problems.

SUSAN: Study other movements here and around the world and examine the state's methods in order to develop tactics that allow you to keep functioning. Very important, if one self-consciously is building a movement that knows the state will destroy it if the movement begins to pose a real or perceived threat.

What is your position on go-go girls in womens' bars?

LAURA: Take me to a bar and we'll have a scintillating discussion of this issue, OK?

LINDA: Take me to a bar and I'll let you know!

SUSAN: I think that anything that objectifies women as sexual objects (versus sexual beings) is anti-woman. Even in an all-woman context. Being lesbian is subversive because women loving women is a crime against the state, and against the bourgeois patriarchal morality of this society -- but being subversive doesn't necessarily mean it's about liberation. If nothing else I have learned that liberation and the need for it begins in oneself

What do you do all day?

LAURA: My time is divided among: fighting for decent conditions and against the prison's denial of those things (a daily necessity!), working on my political and legal work, communicating with people via letters and phone calls, talking to other prisoners (and working with them to try to deal with legal issues, health issues, etc.), meeting with my codefendants, trying to find out how my comrade Alan is (he's engaged in a hard, life-and-death battle with cancer, shackled to a bed in the I.C.U. oncology unit at D.C. General Hospital [Editor's Note: Since this interview took place, Alan has recovered and was released from prison in June 1992]). I spend a lot of time talking to women about AIDS -- by one estimate, 40-50% of the women in here are HIV+, yet there is no program, no education, no counseling provided. Like my other comrades, I spend a lot of time doing informal counseling and education on this.

LINDA: Work and work out.

SUSAN: Because I am a doctor of acupuncture and a conscious person I have become (in addition to a political prisoner) a peer advocate/AIDS counselor. It is not recognized by the jail but I spend 75% of my time counseling people -- women who are HIV+. The other time is spent doing my other work, and talking with others. We spend a lot of the day locked down in our cells. Because of the overcrowding, and lack of programs the administration keeps us locked down an enormous amount of time.

How do you deal with your white privilege in jail?

LAURA: I struggle to be aware of it; I fight racism actively and organize for that fight; I try to make the resources that I have access to, available to others. Educating people about how to fight AIDS is another way, because that's information that the gay and lesbian movement have that women in the D.C. Jail lack -- and it means that women are continuing to contract the HIV every day. That is a crime.

LINDA: I try to use the resources and education I've had access to as a result of my white privilege to benefit all the prisoners I live with, and to fight for our interests. This takes many forms, from struggling as a prisoner for the institution of AIDS education and counseling programs, to helping individual women with legal problems or abuses of their rights by the jail. When I was in jail in Louisiana, we were able to win a jailhouse lawyer's legal suit forcing the jail to give women glasses and false teeth (all jail dental care amounts to is pulling teeth, and few jails replace them). One of the conflicts I confront is between dealing with immediate needs and crises as an individual counselor/agitator/jailhouse lawyer, and always pushing the institution to provide the services and programs that prisoners should be entitled to as a basic human right -- education, medical care, exercise, mental health and AIDS counseling.

ist resistance. Of course the government has misrepresented me and all of us. The main form that has taken is to call us terrorists, which is something that couldn't be further from the truth. Just like all opposition to the cold war of the 50's was labeled communist, the 80's equivalent is terrorist. Now there are all kinds of terrorists according to the U.S. -- all of it bullshit. I don't mean to beg the question in the specific. I believe that no revolutionary captured comrade says what they have or haven't done within their revolutionary work.

Audre Lorde says the master's tools (violence) will never dismantle the master's house (the state). How do you react to this?

LAURA: I don't think "violence" is just one thing, so I don't think it's necessarily "the master's tool". If revolutionaries were as vicious and careless of humanity and innocent human lives as the U.S. government is, then I think we'd be doing wrong. But when oppressed people fight for freedom, using "violent" means among others, I think we should support them. Would you have condemned African slaves in the U.S. for killing their slave masters, or for using violence in a struggle for freedom? To me, the issue is how do we fight effectively -- and humanely -- for liberation. As we build the struggle, we have to be very self-critical, very self-conscious about how we struggle as well as what we struggle for. But I think we also need to fight to win -- and I think that means engaging in a fight for power. For the past 5+ years, I've witnessed close up the violence -- slow, brutal, heartless of genocide against African American women. To refuse to fight to change that (and I don't believe we can fight for power completely "non-violently") would, I think, be to accept the violence of the state in the name of rejecting the violence of revolutionary struggle.

LINDA: I disagree with posing the question in the way she does (or how the question does). I don't think the issue is violence, but rather politics and power. Around the world, imperialism maintains itself -- keeps itself in power -- by military power and the threat of violence wherever people struggle for change. Liberation movements have the right to use every means available to defeat the system that is oppressing and killing people. This means fighting back in self-defense, and it means an offensive struggle for people's power and self-determination. But reducing it to a tactical question of "violent means" doesn't recognize all the aspects of building a revolutionary movement that are crucial to actually mobilizing people, developing popular organizations, empowering oppressed groups within the people's movement like women and indigenous people, developing a revolutionary program that can really meet people's needs and that people will fight to make real. A slogan that embodies this for me comes from the Chinese Revolution: "Without mass struggle, there can be no revolution. Without armed struggle, there can be no victory."

SUSAN: I always took the quote from Audre Lorde to mean the opposite of what you say. Funny, no? I always interpreted her saying that to mean the masters' tools being electoral/slow change. Well -- there you go!

Why is it important to support political as opposed to non-political prisoners? Shouldn't we be concerned about all prisoners?

LAURA: I think we should be concerned about all prisoners, and I don't think it's ever been us political prisoners who have promoted any irresolvable contradiction between us and the rest of the prisoners in the U.S. But within that, I think there is a particular need for progressive movements to defend political prisoners, because it's a part of fighting for the movements we come from. If you are fighting racism and homophobia, and there are people serving long sentences in prison for fighting those things, I think you advance the goals by supporting the prisoners. I also think that support for political prisoners helps expose how repressive and unjust the whole system is. That can also be an avenue to supporting all prisoners.

Support for political prisoners is a concrete act of resistance to the control the government keeps over all our minds: it fights the isolation and silencing of political prisoners and POWs. It asserts the legitimacy of resistance. And in my experience it is a major way that people outside become aware of the purpose and nature of the prison system as a whole.

LINDA: Yes -- it's important for our movement to be concerned about all prisoners, and I think it's especially important for the lesbian and gay movement to concern ourselves with combating attacks on lesbian/gay prisoners, and supporting all prisoners with AIDS. Concerning ourselves with all prisoners, and with the repressive/warehousing role of prisons in our society is another way of fighting racism, since the majority of prisoners are from Third World communities. Prisoners get locked away -- out of sight, out of mind -- and the few prisoners' rights that were won in prison struggles are being undermined and cut back. Human rights are nearly non-existent in prison, and without community support and awareness, the government can continue to escalate its repressive policies, and conditions will just steadily worsen. This is especially true for prisoners with AIDS, since the stigma attached to AIDS in society generally is heightened in prison. Prisoners with AIDS die at an even faster rate than PWAs on the outside because treatment is so sporadic, limited, and conditions are so bad. So I would never say for people to support political prisoners as opposed to nonpolitical prisoners. Our interests inside prison are definitely not in opposition to each other. All the political prisoners/POWs actively fight for prisoners' rights, and for changes in conditions that will benefit all prisoners. But it's important to build support specifically for political prisoners because we represent our movements, and it's a way for us to protect and defend the political movements we come from against government repression. For the movement on the outside to embrace and support political prisoners/POWs makes it possible for us to continue to participate

the U.S. I was especially inspired by the Vietnamese and by Black people struggling for civil rights and then for Black Power/Black Liberation. Vietnamese women fighters and Black women in the struggle were role models for me -- because they were dedicated to fighting until victory was won. Their courage and dedication, their willingness to risk everything for freedom, the fact that women were being empowered by the process of struggle -- all were exemplary.

So by supporting these national liberation struggles I came to support the right of oppressed people to fight for liberation by any means necessary. Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh were important influences in my life and political development. But I actually became determined to participate in armed struggle because of the rage I felt after the FBI/police raids on Black Panther Party offices and homes all over the U.S. and particularly the murder of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark by Chicago police.

The intensity of this police terrorism against the Black community in so many cities made me realize that whenever a political movement even begins to threaten the stability of the status quo, the state will act in whatever ways it must to destroy it. In order for a revolutionary movement and vision to prevail, therefore, it's necessary for us to defend ourselves and our comrades, and to build our own capacities toward a day when we can seriously challenge the repressive power of the state, so that state power can be taken out of the hands of those who use it to oppress, taken over, instead, by the people themselves. I know this sounds idealistic, yet it is a struggle that has succeeded in many countries around the world.

I believed then -- as I do now -- that U.S. imperialism was the main enemy of the people of the world, and I wanted to fight on the side of the oppressed to build a better world for all. This was the era of Che Guevara's call for "2, 3, many Vietnams", and I recognized that the U.S. government depends on the "domestic tranquillity" of its population to allow for imperialist interventions around the world. This is one reason the Black Liberation struggle was such a threat, and why white people fighting in solidarity with national liberation struggles were threatening as well. That's part of the reason that the repression of the internal liberation movements was so immediate and devastating, and why there were such efforts to divide off white struggles from these struggles.

SUSAN: The war against the Black Liberation movement by the FBI/U.S. government was most influential for me in seeing the necessity for armed self-defense. The challenge placed on us who were in a position of solidarity with revolutionary nationalist Black organizations was to uphold self-determination and to fight for it. The other element that most personally propelled me into armed clandestine resistance was witnessing the genocide of the chemical war being waged in the South Bronx against Black and Puerto Rican people. As a doctor of acupuncture and community health worker I watched us fail to stop the plague.

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prison so I have not been a part of its development. I don't think the gay movement can be relevant to other oppressed peoples and their struggles without an anti-imperialist analysis of the roots of gay oppression and then correspondingly a practice that implements that. In other words a movement that is led by white middle class men -- even those oppressed because of their sexual identification/orientation -- without ceding power (within the movement) to Third World women and men, and dealing with their agendas will ever be anything but reform-oriented. To only struggle for gay rights without struggling for the rights (human and democratic) of all those in need, and specifically those who are nationally oppressed sets up competing struggle rather than a cohesive radical opposition to the government.

What was going on in your life that led you to participate in or support armed struggle?

LAURA: I began supporting armed struggle in the late 60's, when I realized the government would keep on killing Third World people if left to its own devices. The murder of Fred Hampton (chairman of the Illinois BPP) by the Chicago pigs and FBI was a turning point, not only because it was an assassination, not only because the state tried to cover it up, but also because it made me understand that the U.S. would never agree to "give" oppressed nations their human rights. That's why the government had to kill Fred, and Malcolm X, and so many other leaders.

I'd hated the injustice of this society for years, but it was in the 60's, when I supported the Vietnamese, Native American struggles, the Black struggle, Puerto Rico and saw those nations waging struggles for freedom that included armed struggle -- that I started to see that there could be a struggle to win. Once I began supporting Third World nations' right to use armed struggle to win self-determination, it made sense to me that I should be willing to use many forms of struggle to fight, too.

Mostly, I think that it's my vision of what a wonderful thing it would be to live in a just, humane, creative world that motivates me to embrace armed struggle as one part of what it takes to fight for a new society.

LINDA: When I first became a political activist, I was a pacifist. I had never experienced real violence in my own life, and naively hoped that the changes I envisioned could come about non-violently. Then, I got beat over the head and teargassed by cops guarding the Pentagon at my first major demonstration. I came "head-to-head" with the fact that this system maintains its power through violence on every level -- from beating up protesters, to genocide against internally colonized nations, to waging war against nationally colonized nations, to waging war against the people of Vietnam.

I became an activist in a time that was defined by the victories and development of national liberation struggles around the world and inside

in and contribute to the movement we come from and it makes it impossible for the government to isolate and repress us in their efforts to destroy our political identities.

SUSAN: All prisoners are in desperate need of support, and as the population gets greater (in prison) and the repression get heavier the prisons will become a major confrontation within the society. If the prisons are to become a social front of struggle then there must be a consciousness developed to fight the dehumanization and criminalization that prison intends. Political prisoners are important to support because we are in prison for explicitly social/political/progressive goals. Our lack of freedom does affect how free you are. If we can be violated, so can you. There is no contradiction between political and social prisoners.

How does being a lesbian fit in with your work?

LAURA: The same way it fits into my life -- it is a basic, crucial part of my character, my outlook on things, my personality. Because I'm a lesbian, the fight against homophobia and sexism take on particular importance. But really I think my lesbianism helps me care about the oppression of others by the imperialist system. So I think my lesbianism makes me a better anti-imperialist -- it makes me fight all the harder. Being a lesbian in prison is often very hard, but being "out" gives me a lot of strength. I have to say that I am very proud when I hear or read about the struggles queers are waging out there.

LINDA: Being a lesbian has always been an important part of the reasons why I'm a revolutionary -- even before I was self-conscious about how important this is to me! I don't separate "being a lesbian" from any other part of my life, or from my politics. Because I experience real oppression as a lesbian and as a woman, I am personally committed from the very core of my being -- to winning liberation for women, lesbians, and all oppressed people. This makes me more willing to take risks and to fight, because I have a vision of a society I want to live in, and to win for future generations, where these forms of oppression don't exist. I think being a lesbian has also helped me recognize the importance of mutual solidarity and support between the struggles of oppressed people, despite the sexism, heterosexism and racism that often interferes in the process of building these alliances. I really believe that we have a common enemy -- the imperialist system -- and that we have to support each other in all the forms our struggles against that enemy may take. These alliances need to be built in a way that respects the integrity of our various movements.

SUSAN: Well! Being a lesbian is part of the very fabric of my being -- so the question is not really how it fits into my work rather how conscious do I make my lesbianism in living in prison or in the life of resistance I lead. It alternates depending on what the conditions are. Recently I have "come out" because at this point I have chosen to be more consciously lesbian-identified. I have done this because I believe that as gay people we need

more revolutionary visions and strategies if our movement is to become significant in linking the overturning of sexual oppression with other forms of oppression. The other reason I have felt compelled to be out is that my tightest, most important women in the community we live in are the butches. It is the butches who suffer most for their choices/existence in prison. In recognition of Pete, Cowboy, JuJu, Slimie, and all the other sisters it seems only right. Finally -- Laura and Linda have been out since the RCC6 began and it has been a very important political and personal experience for them, and for us all. They have through their struggles created an environment of love and solidarity that enabled me to subsequently "come out" as well.

How have you struggled with sexism and heterosexism in the groups with which you have worked?

LAURA: Mostly by confronting people when I think they are being sexist or heterosexist, and by fighting for women's liberation and lesbian and gay liberation to be included not just as words but as real goals. The saddest times for me have been those times when I was in groups where we didn't do this. I think it's very important for people to be able to struggle for a variety of goals without setting up a hierarchy or exclusive list. I will continue to join groups whose main program is, for example, anti-racism or support for Palestine or Puerto Rico, because those things are just as necessary for my liberation as women's and lesbian liberation are. And I won't demand that my liberation be made a part of every agenda. But I won't ever deny my identity, my right to be respected, and the urgency and legitimacy of lesbian, gay and women's liberation, either.

SUSAN: I have become much more of a feminist over the last number of years -- and by that I mean ideologically and politically I believe we have to examine the position of women, the structures of the society and how male dominance defines women's position in all things. I don't think in the past I fought against the subjugation of women and gay people enough. I substituted my own independence as a woman with actively struggling against political and social forms of oppression. For example: in Nicaragua now, the women militants of the FSLN are reevaluating their practice of struggling against sexism, and some of them are self-critical that they subordinated the struggle of women to the needs of the so-called greater societal good. What it means now is that abortion and the struggle for reproductive rights under the new non-revolutionary society are being set back generations, and the level of consciousness among women is not (at this point) strong enough to effectively challenge this development. I believe that to subordinate either women or gay people and our demands is a big mistake.

What is the connection between the primarily white middle class gay rights movement and the struggles of other oppressed people? How do we envision a gay movement that encompasses other struggles?

LAURA: I believe that any struggle of "primarily white middle class" people has the danger of being irrelevant to real social change unless it allies itself with the struggles of oppressed people. This country has a great track record for buying off sectors that have privilege. Once that happens, not only do things stay the same, they get worse. But even more than that, I feel that we cannot be full human beings unless we fight for all the oppressed. Otherwise, our struggle is just as individualist and racist as the dominant society. In that case, we'll never win anything worth fighting for. I think the queer movement needs to talk to other movements and communities, in order to work out common strategies and figure out how to support one another. I think we need to talk to groups in the national liberation struggles in order to figure out how to set our agenda and strategy -- like what demands can we raise in the fights about AIDS that can help other communities fighting AIDS? It's a struggle, not necessarily an easy process, but it's crucial. It's also true that our movement has already adopted lessons from other movements -- often without even realizing or recognizing it. We've especially incorporated strategic concepts developed (at a high cost!) by the Black Liberation struggle from the Civil Rights movement to the Black Power and human rights struggle. It's no accident that Stonewall's leadership was Third World gay men and lesbians. So I think it's important to recognize that whenever we pose the question of alliances and coalitions, we don't need to "encompass" other people, we need to ally with them, learn from, and struggle side by side with them. We need to support them. And we need to fight for them as well as for ourselves, because the second we accept divisions or ignore the urgency of fighting racism, we lose.

LINDA: I don't think that struggles against sexism or homophobia or racism can be delayed, because these are forms of discrimination/oppression that actively disempower individuals and groups of people who can be mobilized to actively participate in the struggle. Racism, sexism, and heterosexism cannot be tolerated in our movement or in our alliances because we don't want to duplicate the oppression that we're fighting against. Of course the process of building these alliances is difficult and long-term, because building trust and respect requires building relationships that are really different from those that exist in society in general. So I don't think the primarily white middle-class gay rights movement can, or should, "encompass" other struggles. White middle class gay men and women cannot set the agenda for other movements or for other communities. Rather, I think that this movement should actively support struggles against other forms of oppression as a way of making our own movement stronger, more revolutionary, less self-centered, and more supportive of the goal of liberation and self-determination for all oppressed people.

SUSAN: This is a big question and has many aspects to it. I can only offer a small answer, as I believe that prisoners who have no social practice in a movement because of being locked up have a warped or limited understanding of the real dynamics in the free world movements. The gay movement as it is currently constituted has reemerged since I have been in