

# So Be Different

By Craig Washington

Remarks presented at Atlanta Gay Pride June 25, 2005 Piedmont Park

I dedicate my remarks to James Baldwin, the most important writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Pat Parker, the black lesbian writer who dared to ask us "Where Will You Be?"

How does it all come together Unite and Act? Two little words with big meanings. So Vast. So Broad. Best to take them then one at a time. What does it mean to for us to Unite? Well first we have to determine who Us is? Is there in fact an Us? Are we a community or rather a mass of individuals, a population that has some things in common that we find fundamental to our sense of being? Is it our experience as people who desire those of the same gender? Does that include those of us who experience our gender differently from the gender that is assigned to us at birth according to our genitals? What is Us? Are we Us because we have same gender sexual and emotional attraction or do you also need to shop at Outwrite and cruise at the Lions Den or cruise at Charis and shop at My Sisters Room in order to be a member of Us. And what does Us call ourselves? Like the Rose, if we were called by any other name would Us not smell as sweet? Whether we call ourselves gay, lgbtq, same gender loving, queer, tranny, pansexual or we choose not to call ourselves by any such identities, it is my belief that the idea of Us many of us carry in our heads, our hearts and our loins is part Fact and part Assumption, some Truth and some Myth. The Us is defined not only by common traits and behaviors that bridge our countless differences of color, gender, age, class, ethnicity, spiritual beliefs, and history. The Us is also outlined by the lines of demarcation etched by our oppression. Whatever the differences we have among us, and not matter how we choose to accept, ignore or resist those differences, part of what defines Us are the Beliefs, the Forces, and the Acts that place us outside the gates of society. We who are at once the Outsiders, the Sexual Outlaws, the Freaks. We who are Other, Different. We the Nigger, the Queer, We the Nameless and We who have Many Names.

On the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Atlanta Gay Pride, it is We who are called to Unite and Act. This motto evokes the spirit of the very origin of Gay Pride itself. The Stonewall Riots. That little inauspicious hole in the wall known as the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. When New York's finest raided the Stonewall Inn in June 1969, it was not the first time. Police raids at gay bars and private parties were fairly commonplace back then. But there was something different about that weekend, you see reigning gay icon Judy Garland had just made her final curtain call a week prior, it was a brutally hot summer in the city, and the queens were not having it. So when the police went about their business as usual they were met with a rather unusual response. The queens let them have it. They let them hold it baby. With bricks, sticks, stones, pumps and any other projectile to, as Malcolm X would say, do their best to make sure that the police never put their hands on them again. Thus began the Stonewall Riots which took place over the course of a few days. The following year those riots were commemorated with a political march. Not a parade, a march which is an important and all but lost distinction. And I did say queens right? Yes they were drag queens. Most of them did not look like the cover models for gay magazines or even the images in the Pride guides we see today. Not only because they were queens but also because several of them were Black and Latino queens. Ironically it is their choice to Unite and Act that ushered the modern gay rights movement which has evolved to both reflect and reinforce the current assimilationist culture that deems gender outlaws (androgynous and transgendered people, masculine women, effeminate men) as a political liability and a social embarrassment to those gays who fancy themselves as normal, those who present their gender in a heteronormative fashion.

In order to Act effectively, we must unite and in order to unite we must have the courage to act. We must learn from our history. A true history, not the "How the Wild West was Won" version of Gay history currently on exhibit at the Atlanta History Center today where I am told only one Black gay man and no Black lesbians are represented. Nor the retrospective of Atlanta Prides in this week's Southern Voice that has 5 pages with no articles written by openly transgendered people, where all the Blacks photographed are entertainers and no other kinds of people of color are shown, where there is no mention of TriKone or APLBTN (Asian Pacific Islander Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Network). We need an accurate record that includes the lives and contributions of the living rainbow that we are. How do we unite in Atlanta? We can begin by recognizing all queer

folk and holding ourselves, our historians and our media responsible for doing so. In the official Pride magazine only 15 – 20% of the faces are obviously people of color. Look throughout all gay media and see if they reflect our variance of race and ethnicity, body shape, physical abilities and disabilities, or the diversity of our interests and concerns. We can do better than this. Atlanta must do better than this. It can be tedious, frightening and painful. It costs a lot as does anything in life that is worthwhile and sustaining. We cannot shirk our duty by saying, “Oh I don’t see color.” We cannot fling our hands up and say, “Well somebody’s always going to be left out” or “Straight people discriminate in their media.” You are not straight. You are different so dare to be different beyond the circumstance of your orientation and make a difference. There is no justification to justify our refusal to act.

Whether we unite as queers of all colors, or by race/ethnicity, whether it is single-issue focused as in gay marriage, or addressing multiple oppression to take on poverty, racism and homophobia, we cannot do so effectively until we grapple with those questions and wrestle with those issues. Another option to consider is progressive coalitions that are not based on single or multiple identity sets but on a defined set of social justice values and goals. Coalitions that could include any and all who are willing to work together across traditional identity lines to eradicate homophobia and other forms of domination.

Activism that seeks to dismantle homophobia while refusing to challenge other forms of discrimination operates in collusion with the status quo of race and class based exploitation. Last year, in Atlanta and across the nation, influential gay political organizations such as HRC saw gay marriage as the primary issue to galvanize queer activism and those who did not prioritize this issue were widely criticized. But many who work tirelessly for the rights of gays and other marginalized groups did not believe that the right to marry was the central issue upon which we must concentrate our efforts. They recognized this as another wedge well placed by conservatives to divide and divert us. They questioned marriage as a dubious status to pursue as it is rooted in elitist patriarchal values antithetical to their work which addresses not only homophobia, but racism and classism as well. While these organizers are opposed to any anti-gay discrimination, they feel that it is far more important to fight for broader access to rights to health care and other benefits that should be afforded regardless of class and marital status.

We need multicultural, multiracial organizing and race specific work in our different communities. Even if Atlanta Pride became as inclusive and diverse as it could be, Black LGBTQ people would still want to have Black Pride to celebrate their specific culture and take on their specific concerns. Our natural desire to connect with people that look like us is not the problem. It is our refusal to be with those who do not look like us, even though we may be all queer or at least human that is the problem. It is the system and the policies that determine which of us get in and which are left out, that are the problem.

However we choose, let us unite and act collectively. Atlanta needs a viable community center in order to provide an inclusive space that was created with all of us in mind, one where everyone in this park today would feel welcome. Unite and Act. Atlanta needs gay media that appreciates our diversity so that one does not have to be an able bodied white man under 35 years old to be profiled. Unite and Act. The activists need to establish some networking spaces, an ongoing lunch or dinner potluck that brings us together to plan and fund anti-oppression programs that will help us work through our internal conflicts and build more trust among us. Unite and Act. Those of who are not interested in conventional forms of political activism can create change where you are. Do you. Be different. Start a discussion group in your own cliques, recommend the writings of bell hooks or Urvashi Vaid for your book club, or just talk to your friends about the difficulties and possibilities of social change. Do something differently and challenge yourself today. Do not excuse your self with excuses. Act. Those Stonewall queens did not stop to ponder "well I can't fight back because I am not this" or "I don't have that." We stand here now because they Stood Up then. I do not claim to know exactly why those fabled fairies stood their ground on that fateful day but I do not believe that they fought just for the pretty and the privileged, the straight-looking, you know the butch men or the femme women only. They united in action. Now it is your turn. It is your time. You have the opportunity to Act Now. You are different. So be different.

Peace in Our Lifetime