

## **Negotiating Difference and Building Community: Race, Nationality and Normatives in Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Civil Rights Activism**

by Kathryn Kane

Following the 1993 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington, pioneering social activist Barbara Smith wrote an essay critiquing the event. In this essay Smith voiced her concern about the state of contemporary gay and lesbian activism. A prominent figure in movements fighting sexism, racism, capitalism and heterosexism, Smith commented that she “worked from the assumption that all of the ‘isms’ were connected.”<sup>1</sup> Smith did not see such a framework evidenced in the 1993 March.

The failure was particularly stark in regards to the way the March positioned the relationship between racism and heterosexism.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between sexuality and race based civil rights organizing remains every bit as mired in territorial battles and dividing lines today as it appeared over a decade ago, at the time of the '93 March. But, the fractured state of the left and the challenges of addressing the complex nature of both power and identity make the stakes in resolving this relationship higher than ever. Taking seriously Smith's concerns, this paper uses the 1993 Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual (GLB) March on Washington as a jumping off point to illustrate the limits of contemporary efforts to organize around identity. I show how queer activists' failure to attend to the relationships among “isms” has significantly undercut their organizing efforts. To illuminate why this is so, and indicate a better way, the paper utilizes insights regarding the nature of identity that have emerged in transnational scholarship. Scholars like Martin F. Manalansan VI and Lisa Lowe have offered productive means to re-figuring ideas of identity by attending to the distance between a singular idea of an

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Smith, “Where's the Revolution?,” *The Nation*, (July 5, 1993): 13.

<sup>2</sup> bell hooks explains the power of using the term heterosexism rather than homophobia to discuss the prevalent prejudices toward heterosexuality in contemporary U.S. culture outlining the ways homophobia misrepresents power and individualizes a social system. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory From the Margins to the Center* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), 152.

identified group and the complexity of living bodies. These ideas that can be productively applied to civil right organizing facilitates a model of understanding identity that would support organizing that focuses on connections among people and refuses to singularize and simplify either identity or power.

Too often GLB organizers take on a neoliberal frame. Queer theorist Lisa Duggan explains, “Neoliberalism, a late twentieth-century incarnation of Liberalism, organizes material and political life *in terms of* race, gender, and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion. But the categories through which Liberalism (and thus neoliberalism) classifies human activity and relationships *actively obscure* the connections among these organizing terms.”<sup>3</sup> The manner in which GLB organizers engage the concept of axis identities accepts the neoliberalism’s mandate of division, which not only keeps race and sexuality separate, but also keep economics separate from culture and politics. This logic supports naturalized universalized truths of identity, and this in turn supports a fragmented system that does not allow for radical systemic change. Only by breaking free of neoliberal frames that posit separable axes as universal truths can we find in new vision of connection. By challenging our understanding of the organizing terms that currently define our social system we can create a new and revitalized method for engaging in civil rights work.

I start with Smith’s observations because in evaluating the 1993 Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual March on Washington, Smith takes ideas of political activism, civil rights organizing and identity politics seriously. Rather than dismiss these as anachronistic or idealistic notions, she asks critical questions about the practices and visions that those attempting to work for social justice utilize. Thus, she challenges those working within

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<sup>3</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (New York, Beacon, 2003), 3.

GLB politics to explicate their vision of power and justify their actions. In so doing, Smith offers a model of critical introspection that facilitates civil right movements' vibrancy and growth. Smith treats the March as a productive moment that situates GLB politics in relation to all that surrounds it, as well as a moment that reifies a particular constructed vision of identity. Rather than assume that a march for GLB rights will have liberatory effects, she approaches it as a something whose relation to liberation can only be judged through multidimensional analysis. Thus, Smith asks questions that open the door to understanding if and how the social vision of the March has drawn up short before the challenges posed by our complex system of power and identity structures.

Social activists have long been armed with the realization "that all of the 'isms' (are) connected" but, there have been limited advances when it comes to realizing how to deploy this weapon. If "isms" are connected, whom does one target? Who does one serve? How can one change anything in the face of not being able to change everything? Moreover, this idea that all "isms" are connected starkly contrasts dominant modes of understanding identity within civil rights organizing efforts. This dominant mode focuses on a singular aspect or axis of identity (e.g. race, class, gender and sexuality being the most developed organizing axes). Using the 1993 Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual March on Washington as a starting point, I focus specifically on the way this event and works that it inspired fall prey to this kind of thinking about identity and the limitations it establishes. I end the paper by exploring the new civil rights possibilities that could be created by looking at identity outside an axis model.

Though this work focuses particularly on the relationship between African Americans and gays and lesbians, it has implications that exceed these identity categories. After all, in my exploration of the ways gay and lesbian and African American identities have been cast in relation to one another I question when, where, and

how these identity positions are constructed, and offer insights into the ways these identities create boundaries among people while simultaneously drawing these same people into complex systems that exceed all singular categories. This work presumes that any effective means to substantively rethink the boundaries between identity categories and re-chart social organization must begin with a grounded understanding of the effects materialized identity categories impose. I use the term materialized here because a fundamental premise of this work is that bodies and the identities that mark them are not essentialized units but social constructions that take shape according to a complex interplay of social narratives.<sup>4</sup> Materialization holds that bodies, like all matter, are produced through social interactions. This means bodies are marked by history and ideology. This attention to materialization is critical because it both connects bodies to contestations over power and it places bodies in lived space. Lived space can actually be approached as a space of contestations that brings to the fore the contradictions among atomized visions of what bodies are, particularly as they emerge in ideologies of identity. Lisa Lowe, a scholar whose work focuses on comparative literature and Asian American cultural politics, has used things like labor organizers' testimony as an avenue to rethink understandings of identity. Her work has exciting implications for civil rights organizing as it describes how attention to the terms of materialization can "displace the categorizing drive of disciplinary formations that would delimit the transgressive force of articulations within regulative epistemological or evaluative boundaries."<sup>5</sup> Following through on Lowe's insight this work explores the way identity structures often reflect such categorizing drives. It further posits that civil rights work based on these types of identity

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<sup>4</sup> Works that explicate the theoretical justification for this position include Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* and Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1*. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1* (New York: Random House, 1978).

<sup>5</sup>Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 157.

groups is mired by its own regulative epistemological boundary. Thus, though this work focuses on understandings of gay and lesbian and African American identities, it examines the ways these categories account for ideas of gender, class, nationality and place. In the end, this methodology facilitates work that attends to identity as a complex and contradictory structure.

Rooted in a singular idea of gay and lesbian identity, the 1993 Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual March on Washington reflected a logic of division and false unity. This limited logic was evidenced by the way the 1993 event approached gay, lesbian and bisexual people as a singular group. Racial difference (as well as class, gender, national, ethnic and other differences) was largely unaddressed, though positions of power and authority among the March organizers were almost exclusively held by white people. This elision is particularly disappointing as popular perception connects GLB identities to white normatives. Evoking a singular race-blind, indicatively white, image of a GLB identity and presenting this as a base for civil rights organizing, this activism negatively impacts both race and sexuality based struggles for justice. The March normalized white, middle-to-upper class, predominately male, non-immigrant citizen's concerns as GLB concern which, as Alan Bérubé has noted in work that examines the general state of GLB activism, has the effect of making issues like "homelessness, unemployment, welfare, universal healthcare, union organizing, affirmative action, and abortion rights" seem like "nongay issues."<sup>6</sup>

For GLB activists, these rifts have yet to be resolved, a fact that the racial tensions surrounding the 2000 Gay and Lesbian Millennium March on Washington aptly

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<sup>6</sup> See Alan Bérubé "How Gays Stay White and What Kind of White They Stay." in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, eds. Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J, Nexica and Matt Wrey (Durham, Duke University Press, 2001), 235.

illustrates.<sup>7</sup> What makes the assumption of a homogenous- indicatively- white GLB audience particularly insidious for the 1993 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington is the way this March simultaneously worked to call forth the race based civil rights struggles of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This linkage was facilitated by the fact that the GLB march took place on the thirtieth anniversary of King's March for Jobs and Freedom. In refusing to critically examine the racial politics of their own event, GLB organizers separated struggles for racial and sexual justice in problematic ways. This paper illustrates the dangers inherent in GLB civil rights organizers positioning themselves, as they did at 1993 march, as the new bearers of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's. civil rights legacy, as well as the dangers of maintaining King as the definitive model of civil rights organizing.

I illustrate how GLB organizers' refusal to engage the complex interplays between race and sexuality left them vulnerable to religious right's repackaged this event in the direct action video *Gay Rights/Special Rights*. This text was produced by a religious right group called The Traditional Values Coalition's (TVC's) as part of their attempt to court an African American constituency. *Gay Rights/Special Rights*, which purports to offer a critical analysis of the 1993 march, was made specifically as part of an extended battle to defeat a state wide bill that extended civil rights guarantees to gay and lesbian individuals. It is this movement to create new cynical alliances that strive to limit civil rights that dives me to focus on this issue. I now look to the TVC's text and consider how GLB activists facilitated this narrative.

### **Gay Rights, The Religious Right, and What Went Wrong**

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<sup>7</sup> Ad Hoc Committee for an Open Process. "Will People of Color Pay the Price?: A Statement by People of Color in Support of the Ad Hoc Committee for an Open Process." <http://www.foranopenorocess.org/poc-statement-f.html>. (26 April 2000).

The voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. sounds before any visual appears in the Traditional Values Coalition's documentary video project *Gay Rights/Special Rights: Inside the Homosexual Agenda*. As the screen fills with footage from the August 28, 1963 March For Jobs and Freedom, we hear King speak the famous lines: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal." The video continues with footage of King and his March on Washington as the voice of an unseen commentator explains, "As a result of the kind of constitution that we have, it was wrong, just out of pure logic, for black people be discriminated against solely on the basis of color, and the 1964 and 65 Civil Rights Act was clearly something that needed to be done in order to hold up this notion of justice in our country." A sudden cut marks the screen with a new date, April 23, 1993. Thirty years have passed, and the viewer now finds him/herself confronted with a march that this text would have us believe is far less "logical." The limits of this event are indicated by footage of gay rights advocate and ACT-UP<sup>8</sup> founder, Larry Kramer. This footage features Kramer's addressing the 1993 crowd: "Again, to paraphrase Dr. King, I may not get there with you, but some day we will enter the promise-land where men and women will not be judged by their *sexual desires* but by the content of their character." Cutting away from the close-up of Kramer, the video offers images of the group cheering for this new order. The predominantly black crowd that supported King has been transformed into a sea of whiteness. As the camera passes over this sea, the disembodied voice of a narrator returns to claim, "many failed to notice Mr. Kramer's substitution of the word *sexual behavior* for skin color as he misquoted the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. on the steps of the U.S.

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<sup>8</sup> ACT-UP or the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power was a radical direct action group that mobilized specifically in response to the limited social response to the AIDS crisis. For an interesting discussion of ACT-UP politics sees Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

Capital. Thus began the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender Rights.”<sup>9</sup> Though an ironic charge, as it entails not only a denial of fact that Larry Kramer clearly indicates that he is paraphrasing not quoting, as well as its own misquotation, substituting Kramer’s “sexual desires” with the term “sexual behaviors,” a switch that reinforces the TVC’s platform that casts sexual identity as a personal action—a typification that supports neoliberalisms drive to approach identity as personal and not systemic. This formula casts gay and lesbian rights initiatives as legislation that protects the right to perform sex acts and establishes a vision of irreconcilable differences between these two Marches on Washington. Throughout their video the TVC works to solidify these moral and ideological differences between race-based and sexuality-based political movements. In so doing, it works to establish the illegitimate and dangerous nature of gay and lesbian rights struggles, particularly as they impact African Americans.

*Gay Rights/Special Rights* warns that homosexuals are usurping the language, statutes, and laws won by race-based civil rights leaders, and, perhaps more importantly it is able to draw on the actions of GLB activists to marshal evidence to substantiate this charge. For instance, at the 1993 March, Torie Osborn, then Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, declared, “We (homosexuals) are an emerging, sort of *the* emerging, latest great civil rights movement of the nineties.” This image of a single identity-based group, the GLB people who make-up Osborn’s we, as “the bearer of a civil rights legacy” is a troubling vision. First, it reproduces a limited notion that

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<sup>9</sup> This March was actually called “the Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation March on Washington.” Both the TVC’s choice to include transsexuals and that the March organizers’ choice to leave transsexuals out, illustrate the extent to which transsexuality functions as a margin of sexual liberation discourses. Including transsexuals, the TVC plays on ideas of deviance and difference which allow the March to be seen as a greater site of perversion of transsexuals; excluding transsexuals the March organizers seem to accept the TVC’s association. This is an indication of the limited nature of the work this March can accomplish. Furthermore, the TVC video’s title for the March simply had the word “Rights” in it, leaving out the word “Liberation.” This shift sets the ground for the TVC’s claim that gays and lesbians are asking for “special rights,” as erasing the quest for liberation erases the image of gays and lesbians as a disadvantaged group.



marked early race-based civil rights initiatives that differentiated stigmatized and disadvantaged social groups as separable (the GLB from the poor from the people of color). Secondly, once groups are separable they quickly become hierarchical creating a feeling of competition among social differentiated groups. Or, given the complexity of identities, it can create a sense of competition among aspects of a person's identity. Osborn's words create the impression that issues of sexuality have taken over issues of race. This sense of competition is played on overtly in the TVC video when Cheryl Coleman, an African American woman identified as a "public affairs representative," explains that any bill protecting gays and lesbians would completely undermine the 1964 Civil Rights Act by extending protection to everyone, which means that "there would be no protection for minorities specifically." I present this video in attempt to show the way GLB rhetoric, which focuses on a narrow understanding of GLB identity and positions sexuality-based civil rights efforts as *the* new arena of civil rights struggles, works in terms that defeat a radical social agenda.

*Gay Rights/Special Rights* was part of a direct attempt to build links between African Americans and the religious right. It draws a connection between the religious right and African Americans by explaining that GLB activists and individuals threaten both groups. Public advocacy groups and scholars have noted that since the early 1990s the religious right has been attempting to court a racial minority constituency.<sup>10</sup> To win the support of racial minorities the religious right has had to find some issue to rally around, an issue that would distract people from the abysmal civil rights record they have

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<sup>10</sup> "Religious Right Efforts at Outreach to Ethnic and Minority Communities," (Washington, D.C: People For The American Way, 1995) and Sara Diamond, *Facing the Wrath* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1996).

accumulated since the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> The religious right utilized the “resonant symbol”<sup>12</sup> of homosexuals.

Positioning gays and lesbians as a threat to civil rights, the religious right has been able to claim a position as a protector to people of color. It is easy to dismiss *Gay Rights/Special Rights* as a simple continuation of this strategy. Sara Diamond, a scholar of the religious right, has noted,

Central to the Christian right’s new quest for racial diversity within its ranks is the drive to split gay-rights advocates from their natural allies in communities of color. Black churches have been a mainstay of the African-American civil rights movement. They are now the target of Christian right propaganda aimed at demonizing homosexuals, the latest group to assert its demand for legal equality.<sup>13</sup>

I am troubled by Diamond’s claim that gay-rights advocates and African Americans are “natural allies.” With this assertion Diamond simplifies the relationship between these groups of people, while simultaneously skirting the questions of why this call demonizing homosexuals might be an effective means to court African Americans. Diamond naturalizes identities, and in so doing, she obscures critical ways in which identity operates. As a person with a deep investment in social organizing, I am concerned that this skirts questions of how GLB activists might have positioned themselves in a way that distanced them from African Americans. Diamond’s reasoning does not open an avenue to change, as it does not even question if or how queer rights advocates have facilitated the religious right’s strategy through their political practices of segmenting identity issues. As much as those working in justice movements want to see differentiated socially

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<sup>11</sup> Evidence of this record is amassed in “Religious Right Efforts at Outreach to Ethnic and Minority Communities,” which details the anti-civil rights stances prominent figures in the religious right have taken from the 1960s to the 1990s.

<sup>12</sup> In a book that focuses on one small town’s battle over an anti-gay rights initiative, Arlene Stein explains that the religious right exploited sexuality as “a resonant symbol upon which a group of citizens projected a host of anxieties about the changing world around them....” Arlene Stein, *The Stranger Next Door: The Story of A Small Community’s Battle Over Sex, Faith, and Civil Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Sara Diamond, *Facing the Wrath* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1996), 93.

disadvantaged groups as “natural allies,” such assumptions do not shed light on the manifold tensions that exist among such groups. Such assumptions make no room to explore the racism in GLB movements or the heterosexism in race-based civil rights movements. Suzanne Pharr, a queer civil rights activist, puts the issue in a more productive light: “Many people talk about how the religious right splits communities off from each other. I don’t believe they do the splitting; instead, they simply work the splits that are already there.”<sup>14</sup> I want to create a productive moment out of the argument the religious right is putting forward by asking how it is part of something “already there.”

As I have already indicated, I believe the thing which is “already there” in civil rights based organizing is a tendency to view identity as a singular fixed term, limiting the scope of the organizing effort and creates false divisions between people and issues, or to repeat the words of Alan Bérubé, it has the effect of making “homelessness, unemployment, welfare, universal healthcare, union organizing, affirmative action, and abortion rights...nongay issues.”<sup>15</sup> Such a tendency is not new or unique to GLB organizers. In fact, in examining Dr. King’s 1963 march we can find traces of this same drive. I want to now turn to the legacy of race-based civil rights organizing and ask questions of how identities are conceptualized and ideas of alliance are put forth. This is critical as, to have a future that moves beyond on our past, we must critically examine our history. Though it is rarely given a full airing, there is ample material to consider if one is interested in charting the ways the 1963 March represented the relationship between racial and sexual identities. In particular I am thinking of the relationship between King and the man who planned and organized the 1963 March for Jobs and Freedom, a man

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<sup>14</sup> Suzanne Pharr, “Community Organizing and the Religious Right: Lessons From Oregon’s Measure Nine Campaign” *Radical America* 24:4 (1997): 72.

<sup>15</sup> See Alan Bérubé, “How Gays Stay White and What Kind of White They Stay” *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* eds. Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J, Nexica and Matt Wrey. (Durham, Duke University Press, 2001), 235.

who can be seen standing almost directly behind King in most of the footage of his “I Have a Dream Speech,” and a man curiously absent from the dominant popular historical memory of the event: Bayard Rustin.<sup>16</sup>

Rustin’s civil rights organizing record spans four decades. He started working as a special assistant to King in 1955, during the Montgomery Bus boycotts. Among his accomplishments, Rustin is credited with developing King’s knowledge of non-violent resistance as well as conceptualizing the Southern Christian Leadership Council.<sup>17</sup> Rustin and King’s formal collaboration was cut short, however, in 1960 amidst controversies over Rustin’s sexuality.

In 1953, before Rustin began working with King, Rustin and two other men were arrested in Pasadena, California, for engaging in sexual acts in the back seat of a parked car. Rustin was convicted on morals charges and sentenced to thirty days in jail.<sup>18</sup> Though he had an extensive history of arrests, his particular police record was understood as something that made Rustin political vulnerability as a civil rights worker. When Rustin and King planned a protest of the 1960 Democratic National Convention that Congressman Adam Clayton Powell did not like, Powell used Rustin’s arrest on a morals charge as the basis for a public attack. When this alone failed to upset Rustin’s leadership position, Powell threatened to go to the press with a story that King and Rustin

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<sup>16</sup> The idea to march is generally credited to A. Philip Randolph, who had planned but eventually called off a similar event in 1941 to pressure Roosevelt to open jobs to Blacks in the defense industry. Rustin was the youth director for the 1941 March. Randolph and Rustin worked together to conceptualize the 1963 march that enjoyed a lukewarm reception with other major civil rights activists. At the march, Rustin was introduced as, “the man who organized this whole thing.” Daniel Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 22, 131 and Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*. (New York: Touchstone Books, 1988): 847-8. and *Brother Outsider* (2002), Directed by Nancy D. Kates

<sup>17</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1988), 208. Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 53. John D’Emilio, “Bayard Rustin, Civil Rights Strategist” *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* (Summer 1999): 13.

<sup>18</sup> Branch, 172.

were homosexual lovers.<sup>19</sup> Daniel Levine, one of Rustin's biographers, claims, "(T)he question of homosexuality was simply one that King was too embarrassed to talk about."<sup>20</sup> Whether or not this is the case, it is a matter of historical record that faced with Powell's threat King suggested to Rustin that he resign.<sup>21</sup>

Though King never entirely severed his relationship with Rustin, and he continued to call upon him as an informal advisor, King's reaction to this heterosexist threat is critical. It shows a refusal to take on homophobia and a division of identity issues. Things were still unsettled between King and Rustin when the 1963 March was first proposed. In fact, Rustin was only granted his leadership position in the march because A. Philip Randolph insisted upon it.<sup>22</sup> King was not alone in considering Rustin a political liability. Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary of the NAACP, told Rustin that there were several reasons that he did not want Rustin to be in charge of the March. Among Wilkins' concerns were Rustin's conscientious objector status during WWII, his affiliation as a socialist, the fact that he belonged to the Young Communist League, and the California arrest. Wilkins asked, "Now do you think we ought to bring all that into

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<sup>19</sup> Levine, 120-22 and *Brother Outsider*.

<sup>20</sup> Levine, 121.

<sup>21</sup> John D'Emilio has noted that: "Interestingly, the only public criticism of King's actions that I have encountered came from James Baldwin, the African-American novelist and essayist whose work addressed gay issues openly and who also was familiar with exile." John D'Emilio, "Homophobia and the Trajectory of Postwar American Radicalism: The Career of Bayard Rustin." *Radical History Review*. 62 (1995): 92. D'Emilio is referring to Baldwin's essay "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King" in which he writes that King "Lost much moral credit, for example, especially in the eyes of the young, when he allowed Adam Clayton Powell to force the resignation of his extremely able organizer and lieutenant, Bayard Rustin. Rustin, also, has a long and honorable record as a fighter for Negro rights, and is one of the most penetrating and able men around" (261). What makes Baldwin's lone voice particularly interesting is that, though Baldwin is recognized to have gone back into the closet when he returned to the United States to work with the civil rights movement, he was still often kept at a distance. One example of his standing as a civil rights leader is that despite requests, he was not allowed to speak at the 1963 March. (Branch, 878.)

<sup>22</sup> Randolph had hoped that Rustin would lead the march, but in a meeting with the six chiefs of the movement, King, Randolph, Roy Wilkins of NAACP, James Farmer of CORE, John Lewis of SNCC, and Whitney Young of the Urban League, Randolph could not garner support for this idea. In a compromise, Randolph agreed to serve as director of the March if he could appoint Rustin as his deputy director. (Branch, 847-8 and Levine, 134-5.)

the March on Washington?"<sup>23</sup> As civil rights scholars we must question why these things are seen as baggage too heavy to carry to a civil rights march. We must ask what is the cost of leaving them behind.

As it happened, two weeks before the 1963 March, Strom Thurmond, the Republican Senator from North Carolina, took the Senate floor and denounced Rustin by calling upon all of the issues that Wilkins' feared, though his comments focused on Rustin's sexuality. Thurmond went so far as to enter Rustin's 1953 police booking slip into the Congressional record.<sup>24</sup> The African American reaction to this attack was not as divisive as Thurmond hoped. Eleanor Holmes Norton, who in 1963 worked as one of Rustin's march organizers, has commented, "Now I am sure that there may have been some homophobes among black people at that point, but I am telling you that if there were, they knew how to behave when Strom Thurmond came forward to attack what many of us believe was the only man that could pull off that March."<sup>25</sup> If black people did *not* know how to behave, Randolph offered the lesson that King failed to put forward three years earlier. In his statement to the press Randolph said:

I am sure I speak for the combined Negro leadership in voicing my complete confidence in Bayard Rustin's character, integrity, and extraordinary ability. Twenty-two arrests in the fight for civil rights attest, in my mind, to Mr. Rustin's dedication to high human ideals. That Mr. Rustin was on one occasion arrested in another connection has long been a matter of public record, and not an object of concealment. There are those that contend that this incident, which took place many years ago, voids or overwhelms Mr. Rustin's ongoing contribution to the struggle for human rights. I hold otherwise.<sup>26</sup>

Though a critical step forward, I find myself still wanted more from these civil rights leaders. Though Randolph did not run from Rustin's sexuality, he did not press the issue. In fact, according to Rustin, he instructed the other civil rights leaders that when

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<sup>23</sup> Branch 846.

<sup>24</sup> Branch 861.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in *Brother Outsider*.

<sup>26</sup> Levine, 142.

confronted with questions about Rustin's homosexuality or arrest record to "simply say that we have complete confidence in him and his integrity."<sup>27</sup> What would have happened if Randolph had taken on the way homosexuality is used to undermine a person's integrity and taken this on, specifically as a racial issue?

The popular image of the 1963 March, which merges the event with King, occludes the extent to which that March covered over critical ground that illustrated the inherent connection between, or, moreover, the *imbrication* of racial and sexuality based identity positions. Thus, it is possible that the 1993 battle that gay rights activist waged with the religious right was fought over a flawed symbol. As the 1963 March unfolded the vision of racial justice was pressed into a rather small and somewhat singular space, one that did not allow for a connection between race to other aspects of identity, like gender or sexuality. Rather than engage heterosexism and point to the ways heterosexism and racism are connected, Randolph, arguably the most progressive of the March's organizers, simply maintained that homosexuality was not a viable rationale for excluding a proven and devoted civil rights and labor organizer.<sup>28</sup> Such a stance does not create a space to address sexuality and heterosexism as important social issues that shape racism. This limit facilitates a combative vision of racial and sexual identity, where one must pick which issue should be attended to and which issue should be ignored.

This sort of ranking reflects Rustin's sentiments both before and after the March. After his 1953 arrest Rustin expressed feeling that his sexuality was not an important part of his political work, saying, "I know now that for me, sex must be sublimated if I am to

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<sup>27</sup> "An Interview With Bayard Rustin." *Open Hands: Journal of the Reconciling Congregation Program*. (Spring 1987): 5.

<sup>28</sup> Rustin offered a story that when someone came to Randolph and asked if Randolph knew Rustin was a homosexual, while further questioning if Randolph should have a homosexual work for him, Randolph responded, "Well, well, if Bayard, a homosexual, is that talented—and I know the work he does for me—maybe I should be looking for somebody else homosexual who could be so useful" (Interview 5).

live with myself in this world longer.”<sup>29</sup> This vision which prioritized race over sexuality shifted towards the end of his life when Rustin made statements that align with Torie Osborn’s, quoted earlier in this paper, indicating that gay issues have usurped racial issues as an arena of national concern:

The gay community now becomes the most important element when it comes to answering the question that you have raised about hope. Because the gay community today has taken over where the Black community left off in ‘68 or ‘69. In those days Black people were the barometer of social change; Black people were the litmus paper of social change.... Today gay men and lesbians have taken over that social role.<sup>30</sup>

Such sentiments reflect a base level separation between the issues of racism and heterosexism; they ask one to pick which battles are more important, those waged against racism or those waged against heterosexism. Yes, Rustin does insist that it is important to fight against all kinds of prejudice. He even understands that there is a connection between the differentiated groups within axis categories, something reflected in his comment, “every heterosexual is part of homosexuality.” But, Rustin ultimately maintains a sense of division among axis categories, particularly between racial and sexuality based identities. He pushes people to fight, indicating that if they do not fight bigotry the bigots may eventually come for them, but he does not work to promote an understanding that differentiated bigotries have a deeper connections, that one form of prejudice structures another. Thus, Rustin fails to see that fighting against racism impacts the terms of heterosexism and vice versa.

I did not turn to Rustin and ask questions about his sexuality in an attempt to overwrite one axis understanding of Rustin, a vision of him as a “race man,” with another axis understanding of him, one that now casts him as “gay.” Rather than fall into that trap, I want to examine Rustin as an example of the limitations of such singular and static

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<sup>29</sup> Levine, 71.

<sup>30</sup> “An Interview With Bayard Rustin” *Open Hands: Journal of the Reconciling Congregation Program* (Spring 1987): 7



conceptualizations of identity. In thinking through these ideas I am particularly indebted to the work of Martin F. Manalansan IV. Manalansan's work focuses on the social and cultural identity of Filipino bakla who reside in the United States. Bakla is a Tagalog term that might encompass homosexuality, but emerges in a cultural context that ultimately reads what the Western world might call homosexual behavior in distinct ways.<sup>31</sup> Manalansan insists on retaining a distinct name for this identity as he illustrates that works that read distinct manifestations of sexuality within the singular frame of "gay cultural," normalize and homogenize a diffuse array of social practices. This normalization validates Western logic as truth. Manalansan argues that even as GLB politics have moved to address transnational concerns, a white male gaze has dominated understandings of homosexual identity.<sup>32</sup> Only by addressing the complexity of the multiple identities forced under a GLB label, can we arrive at a politics that reflect the complexity and diversity of these people and reflects the multiple. Only by addressing the complexity of the multiple identities forced under a GLB label can we address the complexity of power. Acting on this insight, civil rights organizers would have to move past axis models and engage the way differentiated aspects of identity are interrelated. This would create variant understandings of the identities that might emerge from race, sexuality, gender, class, and nationality. Manalansan's work specifically challenges GLB organizers. In showing the way a universalized gay subject overwrites critical issues of difference and supports Western hegemony he calls into question basic assumptions about the goals of GLB civil rights workers. For instance, he questions the central role dominant GLB politics have given to ideas of "coming out," the act of publicly expressing gay identity. Manalansan questions if or how the prioritization of "coming

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<sup>31</sup> Martin F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), ix, 21-26.

<sup>32</sup> Manalansan, 5-6.

out” privileges individuation,<sup>33</sup> and individuation that other GLB scholars like Bidy Martin has shown, somewhat ironically, creates a single model of the GLB subject.<sup>34</sup> What’s more, Manalansan illustrates the way concerns over a person being “out” devalue the importance of issues like immigration status, economic viability or alternative understandings of gender identity.<sup>35</sup> In the end the 1993 GLB march focused on isolated ideas of sexual identity. Such ideas always represent a distortion. Rather than create new terms for understanding bodies, power and justice, the GLB marchers re-circulated a limited vocabulary of justice that created the same divisions.

### **How Bodies Can Make Trouble**

Phillip Brian Harper notes in his essay “Private Affairs: Race, Sex, Property, and Persons,”

...for those of us who are interested in the construction of cultural mechanisms by which to understand and combat the social and political forces that keep lesbians and gays in check...the history of racial politics in this country, beyond merely providing us with a ‘model’ for activism—as it has long been acknowledged to do—may actually prove to be the context in which the very terms of our predicament are founded, and, therefore, a domain to which we must recur if we hope to struggle effectively in the contemporary moment.<sup>36</sup>

The 1993 March for Gay, Lesbian, and Bi Equal Rights and Freedom cast racial activism as merely a model for, not a part of, its work. Failing to recognize the radical connection between racial and sexual formations, these activists fostered the image that these causes were separable. In so doing, they misrepresented the structure of identity. Refusing to see the fundamental connection between racial and sexual politics, they failed to cash in

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Bidy Martin, “Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference(s)” in *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Science*, eds. Anne C. Herrmann and Abigail Stewart. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> Martin Manalansan IV, “In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma” in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> Phillip Brian Harper, “Private Affairs: Race, Sex, Property, and Persons” *GLQ*. 1(1994): 130. Harper arrives at this insight in an essay that illustrates how “anti-miscegenation sentiment and homophobia—or at any rate, U.S. versions of them—derive their impetus largely from a common organizing principle; the sanctity of the private realm as a means by which to control the flow of economic capital” (124).

on the possibility, inherent within the structure of identity itself, to create a new social structure.

Identities are complex systems. Recognizing this challenges dominant discourses of identity politics, but it does not do away with identity. Rather, such a tack asks people to engage identity, not as reified sets of truths, but as a schematic that situates persons within a complex matrix of social relationships. This sort of understanding breaks down the walls axis models of identity organizing construct. It leads to an understanding that differentiated persons to be radically connected, and the political interests a group cannot be simply divided according to unilateral ideas of identity. Immigration is a GLB issue. Welfare reform is a GLB issue. Racism is a GLB issue.