



## **Pieces of Us**

by **Ami Mattison**

*The annual Bayard Rustin Rally was held on Jan. 20 1997, in conjunction with Martin Luther King, Jr. Day events. Bayard Rustin was an openly gay civil rights leader. Among his many accomplishments, Rustin served as the deputy director for the 1963 March on Washington. Rustin's legacy as a black, gay man demonstrates the intrinsic links between the black civil rights movement and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender political concerns.*

*This year's rally was sponsored by Second Sunday, Atlanta's black gay men's discussion group; Zami, Atlanta's premiere African-American lesbian organization; Venus Magazine and the Human Rights Campaign. The rally featured several speakers, including local and national queer leaders. I was honored to be among them. The following is an excerpted version of my speech.*

"There comes a time when silence is betrayal," said Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1967. He added, "That time has come for us in relation to Vietnam." Dr. King taught us that to maintain silence when confronted by a nation gone mad with war was a betrayal of ourselves and our movements for freedom, peace and justice. His sentiments would be punctuated, many years later, by Vietnamese-American lesbian poet Le Thi Diem Thuy: *"let people know/ VIETNAM IS NOT A WAR/ but a piece/ of/ us/ sister/ and/ we are/ so much/ more."*

What are the pieces of us? Which pieces do we lay claim to, and which do we refuse to own? How do we honor the totality of our lives, the interconnections of our political movements that are often misconstrued for the fragmentation of our freedom?

Within current political parlance, we are bombarded by nonsensical distinctions among questions of freedom and justice: It's a gay issue, a black issue, an Asian/Pacific Islander issue, a women's issue, an immigrants issue, a homeless issue, an AIDS issue, a welfare issue, etc. While we must assert the specificity of our causes and concerns, we know that justice cannot be compartmentalized in this way. As June Jordan, a black bisexual-woman poet, reminds us, freedom is indivisible. Any question of freedom and justice is also a gay issue, a bisexual, lesbian and transgendered issue.

Many of us know too well what it means to be visible as people of color in racist ways within the larger queer community, to be invisible, seldom visible for the full humanity that we represent. Too many of us know how it feels to speak out as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people in our racial communities and to have the full humanity of our voices go unheard.

Who do you not see here among us? Who is here but made absent by our refusal to see? Do you see me, a Polynesian dyke, as a whole person with whole concerns? Or, if I claim my Polynesian lesbian self, do you see me as merely a piece of some strange humanity, representing unimportant or even unbridgeable differences? Do you see my Asian/Pacific Islander American sisters and brothers? Do you understand what brings us here today?

Within Atlanta's queer community, the specificity of our lives as Asian/Pacific Islander Americans seldom even warrants mentioning. I often hear statements such as, "We must all come together, gay and straight, black and white, or whatever." As a Polynesian lesbian, I am not "whatever." My Asian/Pacific Islander American sisters and brothers and not "whatever." We are not some open-ended, indefinable other.

As Americans of Pacific Islander and Asian descent, we are bisexual, transgendered, lesbian and gay people who are bombarded from all sides by stereotypes and ignorance. Within our diverse racial communities, we are told that homosexuality is a western disease, implying that our love for other women and men is an unnatural betrayal of our racial origins. Within the queer community, many of us who were born in the U.S. and who may never have had the privilege to visit our countries of origin are asked incomprehensible questions: What is your nationality? Which country are you from, and when are you going back? How did you learn to speak English so well? Such questions imply that to be Asian or Pacific Islander is to be the very antithesis of American.

Among the most damaging of stereotypes is the "model minority" myth, a racist and classist distortion which assumes that all Asians and Pacific Islanders are the same, despite our profoundly diverse cultural heritages and histories. The myth tells us that Asians assimilate well into American culture because we all become white-collar professionals. However, the economic and class distinctions among Asian Americans represents the broad spectrum of poverty and wealth. Established by anti-Asian immigrant quotas and exclusion laws in the U.S. that were applied against Asians and not European immigrants, this myth tells us that Asians are the "superior" people of color by the white-supremacist standards of our society. The model minority myth fragments the unity of people of color. It maintains a racial hierarchy, a ranking of privilege and oppression that makes us more concerned with gaining our own personal piece of the American pie rather than demanding more than the bones of survival for us all.

Do we really see one another for the whole complexity of our lives? Or are we also guilty of the insidious fragmentation of social distinctions that set us apart and against one another, like the metal shards of a racist and homophobic bombshell made in the U.S.A.?

In honor of Bayard Rustin and his powerful legacy as a freedom- and justice-loving, black, gay man, today we will not be broken apart into mere fragments of humanity. With our eyes focused on this vision for the totality of freedom, peace and justice, today we can begin to truly see one another. Let us break apart only the silence that surrounds our lives. Let us split the silent air with our many voices, all of us calling for the wholeness of our freedom.

© 1997. Used by permission of *Etcetera* magazine (Jan. 31, 1997; Vol. 13. #5).