

Mainstreaming, Sanitization, and  
the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force:  
A Case Study in Activist Strategies and Organizational Structure

by

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Sanitization and Normalization:

A case study of NGLTF and how its activist strategies and organizational structure have rendered its progressive politics intermittent and unsustainable.

**Civil Rights, Sexual Freedom, and Social Justice:  
The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Move  
Towards Working within a Social Justice Framework**

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## Introduction

While at a screening of the documentary *Gay Pioneers*<sup>1</sup> at Yale in September 2005, I asked Barbara Gittings—one of the founders and a former board member of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF)—how she felt about the commitment NGLTF has made to racial and economic justice and to addressing intersecting forms of oppression since the early 1990s. She responded, “The more planks you add to a [political] platform, the more people you lose, because they find something to disagree with. The [National Rifle Association] is so successful because it sticks to one plank only, and doesn’t care what its members feel about other issues.” Frank Kameny, also present during the event as another founder and former board member, added the line, “Shoemakers, stick to your task,” indicating that NGLTF should focus on advancing issues that are obviously “gay” and “let other groups focus on their issues.”<sup>2</sup> Both Gittings and Kameny were present to field questions about the early years of the gay and lesbian movement—in the U.S.A., the 1950s and 1960s—as both were key organizers in those years and have been well known activists since then. They had already discussed the importance of focusing on a single issue at a time. Further, both suggested that lesbian feminism was divisive and harmful to the gay and lesbian movement because it discouraged lesbians from supporting gay/lesbian liberation struggles due to the inclusion of gay men. Because of this support of single-issue politics, I wondered what their view of NGLTF, an

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<sup>1</sup> *Gay Pioneers*, directed and produced by Glenn Holsten. 30 minutes, Glennfilms/Equality Forum, 2004, videocassette.

<sup>2</sup> Question posed by author during the question and answer period of a talk by Barbara Gittings and Frank Kameny and screening of the documentary *Gay Pioneers* sponsored by Yale’s Larry Kramer Institute, held September 22, 2005 at 5:30pm EST.

organization they were both involved with since the beginning, was, especially since it had changed so much since they helped to found it in 1973.

Their response demonstrates the clear disconnect between what the founders of NGLTF saw as the organization's purpose and the direction it has taken in the thirty-two years since it was founded. Although a board of directors is supposed to give its organization direction, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force evolved in capacity and budget to the point where board members no longer needed to be responsible for organizational projects by the mid to late 1980s. At this point, staff members took a leading role in cementing NGLTF's commitment to social justice and inclusive, multi-issue politics. Indeed, the staff, rather than the board of directors, most influenced the direction NGLTF took in making greater attempts to be inclusive to the great diversity of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBT/queer)<sup>3</sup> community and in increasing support for recognizing other systems of oppression at work beyond homophobia/heterosexism, especially sexism and racism. Because of their individual identities, life experiences, and political affiliations, most staff understood the importance of not requiring people to conform to ideals of normalcy to receive fair and equal treatment, not completely sanitizing discussions about sexual orientation of talk regarding their sexual practices and desires, and not

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<sup>3</sup> I use "LGBT/queer" to recognize that greater fluidity exists between lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identities than is sometimes recognized, but also to acknowledge that "lesbian and gay" and "LGBT" are more commonly used by the communities and organizations I discuss. I also recognize that not all people included in these communities and organizations identify as "queer," but that others only do and do not relate to L, G, B, or T identities, particularly recently. I have tried throughout my thesis to acknowledge when only gay and lesbian people have been included and avoided using LGBT/queer in those instances. I have also only used either "lesbian and gay" or "LGBT" without "queer" included particularly when discussing a national agenda to recognize that a politically queer (referring to such radical activism as mobilized by Queer Nation or related ideas of academic queer theory) national agenda would look extremely different than an LGBT national agenda.

ignoring either the racist and classist structures of institutions or oppressive behaviors of individuals. While by the early 1990s NGLTF's Board of Directors did provide support for the staff's progressive pursuits, it was really NGLTF employees—interacting with grassroots activists regularly—who recognized and acted to make apparent the links between civil rights and social equality for LGBT/queer people, sexual liberation or sexual freedom, and civil rights and social equality for “other” oppressed peoples, including “their own” LGBT/queer people of color.

When I began this project, I wanted to know how NGLTF had become the most progressive national LGBT/queer advocacy organization within the USA. NGLTF claims, and is recognized by others, as *the* progressive LGBT/queer organization, with an explicit and demonstrated commitment to racial and economic justice, transgender issues, and expressed desire to combat systems of oppression in U.S. society, especially as they affected segments of the LGBT/queer community. I wanted to know how—with what language and political strategies—NGLTF has addressed sexual freedom, and how that has been related (or not) to NGLTF's commitment to social justice issues. I wanted to determine what factors and people have shaped how the Task Force has addressed these topic, and how ideas of sexual freedom have been addressed in relation to and in comparison to how gender, race, and class have been addressed.

I come to this project as white, working class, New England born and raised, queer butch woman activist who attended an elite, private liberal arts college. Most of my activism has been around LGBT/queer youth issues, transgender rights, and public health. I first started learning about anti-racism and how systems of oppression

worked from the trainers for the Massachusetts Department of Education's Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students and from other activists involved in the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition beginning around 2001—about a year after starting to work on the state level—and have continued to learn since then. For the summer of 2004, I worked as the Creating Change conference fellow in NGLTF's Cambridge, MA field office with Sue Hyde and an organizer working on the campaign against a state amendment that would ban same-sex marriage in the state. I have also attended three Creating Change conferences, and presented at the second one, where I co-facilitated an anti-racism workshop.

While in college I was firmly committed to engaging with activism outside the college bubble. I began this project hoping to gain strategies for helping LGBT/queer advocacy organizations actually reflect the diversity of the LGBT/queer community in their members, staff, and issues (beyond voicing a commitment to such goals), and for helping them avoid the sanitized, normalizing, and desexualized discourse employed by most LGBT/queer advocacy organizations across the country. Because NGLTF was founded in 1973 to work with mainstream legislative venues, national organizations, and media outlets, and has moved to incorporating ideas of social justice and intersecting systems of oppression into its contemporary work, I initially chose to focus on its evolution as a model of how this might be accomplished. NGLTF has been notably and laudably more progressive than all other national LGBT/queer advocacy organizations in the USA. Other main national LGBT/queer advocacy organizations in the USA include: the Human Rights Campaign, Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the Log

Cabin Republicans, and (possibly/once upon a time) the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund.<sup>4</sup>

Since the late 1980s, the Task Force has made repeated attempts to respond to critiques about how it has often failed to address issues of race, class, and gender coming from the queer community by progressive, multi-issue activists. These activists, many of whom have worked with NGLTF in various capacities and who strongly support its work, are dedicated to reforming the U.S.'s governmental and economic institutions and society as a whole, particularly around equality for oppressed people on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and other axes of social difference, and so bring their critiques from that position with the desire of improving NGLTF. In addition, it has tried to improve its connections to the queer grassroots activism since the late 1980s by facilitating networking between and offering skills shares and technical support to queer activists across the country. These efforts have been focused on the Creating Change Conference and work done both by specific projects since the late 1980s and by the Organizing and Training Department since the mid-1990s. However, NGLTF's efforts to engage with other anti-oppression/liberation movements—movements which would encompass farther-reaching affirmation of, support for, and redress for past wrongs done to marginalized groups than protection-based civil rights alone have ever attempted—such as civil rights, feminism, and anti-war organizing and to address organizational racism, sexism, and classism have been intermittent and unsustainable because they have been initiated and driven by individual staff members who feel personally devoted to such work. The executive directors and board of directors have both failed to sustain

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix for current mission statements of these organizations.



these initiatives or maintain a connection to other movements in any significant way, and particularly not through the allocation of organizational resources. As a result of some staff members, NGLTF has been able to use real examples of its multi-issue organizing to build its membership while ultimately failing to live up to all they say they regularly attempt to accomplish.

NGLTF's inability to sustain an institutional commitment to working with a range of anti-oppressive struggles should not come as a surprise, though, when one considers the Task Force's roots as a pro-assimilation organization, or one striving to create a place of acceptance for gay men and lesbians by including them in the idea of what is was to be "normal," non-threatening, and to contribute to the "good of society" rather than seeking radical changes and questioning what was threatening or why normalcy was considered so important. Its founders created it as an alternative to the gay liberation groups that existed in the 1970s—which focused on consciousness building and action determined by consensus—with the goal of gaining acceptance for gay people in society by primarily employing mainstream strategies for civil rights and full equality. NGTF's founders wanted to focus on mainstream strategies, primarily working for legislative change and building support from very mainstream, well-respected governmental and non-governmental institutions because those were the tactics for social change they were most familiar with as privileged people, and the ones they believed had the greatest impact on society.

Because NGLTF appealed to legislators who are nearly all white, upper class, politically moderate or conservative men, staff members rationalized the use of these assimilationist strategies because they worked to persuade people in power that gay

people are not threatening to straight society, and therefore are deserving of equal rights. As a result, NGLTF (and other national organizations) assumed that the public face of the organization and the lesbian and gay movement as a whole should be as sanitized of societal connotations of sexual activity and explicit references to sexual behavior/actions as possible. Because many marginalized racial and class identities usually carry the connotation of a dangerous sexuality (most often perceived as threatening to white women or whiteness as property<sup>5</sup>), the intersection of oppressed/marked identities among LGBT/queer, lower/working class, and people of color complicates these efforts to desexualize the cause and sanitize the political discourse, especially when whiteness and middle/upper class identities go unmarked and are privileged as normative, and thus are perceived to implicate individuals rather than communities. This is the flip-side of tokenization, in which people with privileged identities are allowed to be individuals, while people with marginalized or oppressed identities are perceived as representatives of their marginalized/oppressed communities. Selectively marking sexual orientation in the case of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer identities, then, purportedly serves to "neutralize" the queer identity, where the additional challenge of other, intersecting identities that (heavily loaded with societal connotations) remain a political challenge for the dominant political actors in LGBT/queer activism to tackle and a challenge to their privileged identities. This is particularly true with identity markers already heavily laden with negative connotations. In other words, NGLTF has employed this strategic approach

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<sup>5</sup> Harris, Cherly I. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 106, No. 8 (Jun., 1993), pp. 1707-1791.

in order to appear less threatening or controversial by making sexual orientation (unmarked as white and upper/middle class) *the* visible identity.

That NGLTF continues to present itself, and is commonly portrayed in the LGBT/queer media, as being *the* progressive national LGBT/queer advocacy organization that has been committed to achieving racial and economic justice since the late 1990s is problematic.<sup>6</sup> NGLTF has asserted its record and reputation since the late 1980s in this way to increase its membership base and expand its appeal, and is currently the only major national LGBT/queer organization to include a commitment to social justice in its mission statement.<sup>7</sup> However, it has largely failed to make any substantial changes at the top of the organization, either in terms of restructuring, or to the organization's overall strategy or allocation of resources. As a result, NGLTF has continued to appeal to the dominant sectors of society and legislators for support in gaining LGBT/queer civil rights by showing a public face that appeals to the mainstream. This strategy of presenting the most "sanitized" version of LGBT identity has lent itself to what Allan Bérubé terms "gay whitening practices." In his critique, "How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays,"<sup>8</sup> Bérubé theorizes that "gay male" is simultaneously assumed to be and constructed as white through "gay whitening practices" such as only recognizing primarily white gay male spaces as universally gay male, while gay male of color spaces are racially labeled. He also theorizes how LGBT activists have decided to use the tactic of "mirroring," which

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<sup>6</sup> Rimmerman, Craig A. "Beyond Political Mainstreaming: Reflections on National Lesbian and Gay Organizations and the Grassroots." *The Politics of Gay Rights*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> "Mission Statements." National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2006.  
<[http://thetaskforce.org/about\\_us/mission\\_statements](http://thetaskforce.org/about_us/mission_statements)> Accessed 19 January 2007.

<sup>8</sup> From Rasmussen, Birgit Brander, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray, eds. *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. pp. 234-265.

presents LGBT experiences to white, upper class, mostly male legislators through white lesbian and gay voices to whom the legislators are assumed to be able to relate to more than they would be able to relate to a gay man of color. His example of mirroring was the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” hearings, which privileged whiteness by presenting white gay men to testify, despite the fact that gay men of color (and even more so, lesbians of all racial backgrounds, though Bérubé does not address how the hearings rendered lesbians invisible) have been far more negatively and frequently affected by “no gays in the military” policies than white gay men.<sup>9</sup>

While mirroring is a strategically understandable decision, it also further empowers people who are very privileged (with the exception of their sexual orientation), as the visual representatives of the community and movement. In turn, especially when this is continually repeated over an extended period of time (which it has been, through NGLTF’s actions and those of most other LGBT/queer activist groups), this perception compounds with existing institutionalized racism and classism that already renders people of color and/or lower/working class people “invisible” to movement needs and organizational agendas. Furthermore, the lack of public representation of LGBT/queer people who are people of color and/or who are lower/working class serves to strengthen the existing focus on issues that white, middle/upper class LGBT/queer people consider to be priorities. While many of these issues, such as non-discrimination policies, anti-violence work, and LGBT/queer family issues (defined more narrowly as time progressed from including all family-related issues to focusing on same-sex marriage and domestic partnership

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<sup>9</sup> Bérubé, Allan. “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays.” from Rasmussen, Birgit Brander, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray, eds. *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. pp. 234-265. Page 240-243.

recognition) also affect LGBT/queer people of color and/or lower/working class queer people, the issues which are then overlooked are those that primarily or more severely affect queer people of color and/or lower/working class LGBT/queer people. Examples include questions such as how non-discrimination policies interact with affirmative action, how welfare reform policies interact with LGBT family issues, and how gay hate crimes legislation functions with the prison industrial complex and criminalization of (especially) Black and Latino men.

In the rest of the introduction, I will explain my methodology, provide an overview of NGLTF history, and give the structure of the chapters. The methodology addresses how I used the archives, who I interviewed and how I decided that, and what my interview questions included. The historical overview of NGLTF is focused on the organization's work so the reader has a sense of the scope of the organization's accomplishments. I will then lay out the structure for my thesis, explaining what each chapter argues.

## **Methodology**

I set out to gather my information about how NGLTF had shifted into its current relationship with "social justice" by interviewing six people who have been affiliated with NGLTF at some point from the 1980s to the present, and conducting archival research at Cornell University, which houses the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's archives. My study was funded by Wesleyan University's Davenport Study Grant during the summer of 2005. I have also worked with the NGLTF archives on microfilm at Wesleyan University's Olin Library. Because the microfilm

of the NGLF archives fails to include oversized pieces, all video and audio tapes, and a number of folders, going to the original archives at Cornell allowed me access to un-transcribed audiotapes and folders not copied for the microfilm which were invaluable. Many of the names I came across while going through the archives made it to my initial list of possible interviewees, and the archives were particularly useful in helping me determine who was involved in what issues, and when, which informed me as I narrowed down the list of who I would ask to interview. Of those I thought would be most important to talk to, I was able to narrow it down to six people: Sue Hyde, Peri Jude Radecic, Sean Cahill, John D’Emilio, Urvashi Vaid, and Carmen Vazquez. I ended up selecting interviewees according to whether I could track down contact information for them, and if they responded to my initial inquiry, as well as their availability for an interview.

I began all interviews with the following questions: When did you start working with NGLTF? What were you working on? What were your reasons and priorities in wanting to work with them? This was intended to make sure I knew and did not forget something of what they had each done with NGLTF. Then I asked about how gender, race, and class were each dealt with by NGLTF staff while they worked there, and how much they were talked about in the office as well as what effect they had when issues were prioritized. I asked how NGLTF engaged with “discussions of sexuality”—when, where, and how they talked about sex, how they engaged with the politics of polyamory (consensually negotiating to have multiple sexual and/or romantic partners), BDSM/leather,<sup>10</sup> and butch/femme identities and

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<sup>10</sup> BDSM/leather refers to Bondage & Discipline/Domination & Submission/Sadism & Masochism/leather. The Network/La Red, a queer domestic violence/partner abuse organization,

relationships (to which lesbian feminism was strongly opposed) as examples to begin the conversation. I would next ask any clarifying questions about the archives or what I had heard from other people—mostly about the Town Meetings on Sex and Politics and the Racial and Economic Justice Initiative (discussed in-depth later). I usually closed the interview with questions as to what intra-community criticisms they had heard about NGLTF, and which of those they considered valid and important. Since John D’Emilio, Urvashi Vaid, and Carmen Vazquez had all been involved with NGLTF for the longest period of time out of all the interviewees except for Sue Hyde, and also happened to be the last three people I interviewed, I also asked them their opinion of it there was a trajectory in which NGLTF moved because of its staff, giving myself the opportunity to incorporate their feedback into my work.

### **Interview Subjects**

The first person I interviewed was Sue Hyde, whom I knew personally from my own Boston activism and because I had worked for her in the NGLTF office the summer of 2004. She began working with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in 1986 as the director of the Privacy Project, freshly-established in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1986 ruling in *Bowers v. Hardwick*. Hyde recalls that hers was the sixth staff position at that point in time. While this was her first time working with NGLTF, as a former news editor for *Gay Community News*, the premier radical gay

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provides the definition: “S/M is the generally accepted umbrella term for a broad group of behaviors that include the consensual giving and receiving of intense erotic sensation. The behaviors used in consensual S/M are negotiated and involved the communication of limits and the use of a safeword that can stop all action at any time. S/M is often referred to as BDSM, which stands for Bondage and Discipline (B&D), Dominance and Submission (D&S), and Sadomasochism (SM). S/M can also be called SM, Kink, Leather Sex, Leather, and SM/Leather/Fetish.” From: Santiago, Sabrina. “Is it S/M or Abuse?” The Network/La Red, 2006. <<http://thenetworklare.org/smvsabuse.htm>> Accessed 17 December 2006.

weekly newspaper in the USA, she had been familiar with NGLTF and its work. She continued in this position until the end of 1990, by which point she had also become heavily involved in the planning and production of the then-newly established Creating Change conference. After taking a few years off from working with NGLTF, she returned full-time as the director of the Creating Change conference in the fall of 1993, a position she holds to this day along with the title of New England Field Organizer. She is a white butch lesbian<sup>11</sup> who has also been heavily involved in NGLTF's Military Freedom Project, NGLTF's Fight the Right Project, the fight for same-sex marriage in Massachusetts, and the passage of many local and state civil rights laws for LGB people.<sup>12</sup>

The next person I interviewed was Sean Cahill, current director of NGLTF's Policy Institute, a think tank dedicated to conducting research, analyzing policy, and developing strategies to advance equality for and understanding of LGBT people. He was hired in the spring of 1999 for this position. He has known Hyde since 1993 through Boston activism and had worked on an anti-gay ballot initiative in New Hampshire with NGLTF around 1993. He is a white gay man who noted his own involvement in ACT UP and Queer Nation,<sup>13</sup> two direct action groups most active in the late 1980s and early 1990s focused on increasing public attention and concern about the AIDS epidemic and combating homophobic violence through queer visibility and public resistance, respectively. Yet Cahill was more widely recognized as having done a great deal of work in Massachusetts around poverty, welfare reform,

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<sup>11</sup> Sue Hyde, interview by author, digital recording in person, 27 July 2005.

<sup>12</sup> "Sue Hyde." *National Gay and Lesbian Task Force*.

<<http://thetaskforce.org/aboutus/staffbio.cfm?staffID=21>> Accessed 7 October 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Sean Cahill, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 19 September 2005



disability policy, health care policy, and community organizing at the time he was fired to work for NGLTF.<sup>14</sup> Upon the announcement that he was hired, he expressed enthusiasm for joining the staff of NGLTF, “which recognizes that all justice issues are related, and that the best way to achieve long-term social and political change is to link GLBT people up with other movements working for equality and transformation.”<sup>15</sup>

Peri Jude Radecic worked for NGLTF from 1987 to 1995, moving from being the lobbyist focusing on non-HIV/AIDS issues and mostly civil rights related issues to being the Legislative Director, then the Director of Public Policy, the Deputy Executive Director, and finally the Executive Director. She had previously working with the National Organization for Women as their National Lesbian Rights Program Coordinator, but lacked the direct action experience that Sue Hyde and Urvashi Vaid brought to the Task Force around the same time period. She is a white woman who used to be publicly involved in the leather/SM community. In a 1993 speech at the Living in Leather conference, she described herself as *not* being a leader in the BDSM/leather community because she was not a titleholder—someone who has won BDSM/leather competitions (usually bar-based) and who acts as a spokesperson for the community as a result. She said her work was concentrated on “a responsibility, given [her] various positions at the Task Force, to create change whenever an opportunity presents itself or whenever [she] can create an opportunity for

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<sup>14</sup> “Sean Cahill Joins NGLTF Policy Institute.” *National Gay and Lesbian Task Force*. <<http://www.thetaskforce.org/media/release.cfm?releaseID=42>> Accessed 7 October 2007.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

change...for lots of communities and for lots of issues.”<sup>16</sup> Yet in that very same speech she discussed the need for the BDSM/leather community to broaden its definition of leadership beyond titleholders and people who run “SM/leather/fetish organization[s]” and for community members to become more politically active. When Radecic resigned, then NGLTF executive director Melinda Paras remarked, “Peri virtually invented gay and lesbian lobbying on Capitol Hill, and the policy department has matured under her direction.”<sup>17</sup>

John D’Emilio first worked with NGLTF in 1983, on a report for a press conference NGLTF organized to mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of President Eisenhower’s executive order banning the employment of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals by the federal government. However, he had been active in New York City gay and lesbian organizing at the same time that the organization was founded in 1973, and so was aware to a certain extent what was then NGTF was doing and what issues it was focusing on before his official involvement with the organization. After working on this report at the request of then-Executive Director Ginny Apuzzo, he “just started kind of doing things”<sup>18</sup> for NGLTF around 1986, beginning with organizing a fundraiser and then hosting Sue Hyde and Urvashi Vaid when they came down to North Carolina as part of the Sodomy Tour. He then moderated the first of the series of NGLTF-sponsored Town Hall Meetings on Sex and Politics, held at the 1987 March on Washington. D’Emilio then formalized his relationship with NGLTF,

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<sup>16</sup> Peri Jude Radecic’s “Living in Leather Keynote Address.” 9 October 1993 (Box 20 Folder 8), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> “Radecic and Domi leave Task Force to pursue other interests.” *National Gay and Lesbian Task Force*. <<http://www.qrd.org/qrd/orgs/NGLTF/1994/peri.jude.and.domi.to.leave.nglftf-12.12.94>> Accessed 7 October 2007.

<sup>18</sup> John D’Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

joining the Board of Directors at the end of 1988. He remained on the board until 1993, and spent some time as co-chair. After this, he held the position of Director of the Policy Institute from 1995 to 1997. Since 1997, he has kept in regular contact with NGLTF, most notably being facilitator of the Policy Institute's National Policy Roundtable.<sup>19</sup> He is a white gay man.

Urvashi Vaid has worked with NGTLF since 1984 as a volunteer in their D.C. office, joining the Board of Directors in 1985, and gaining her first paid position with them, as Media/Public Information Director, in 1986. She brought with her experience in direct action, campus organizing, and law, coming from a job at the American Civil Liberties Union's National Prison Project and years of activism in Boston. Vaid was selected to be the Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in 1989, and stayed in that position until the end of 1992, taking time off to write *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*, published in 1995. In 1997 then Executive Director Kerry Lobel convinced her to take on the job of Director of the Policy Institute, and with that position she reopened NGLTF's New York City office. She then left that position in 1999 to take a job with the Ford Foundation, and has been in unofficial contact with NGLTF since then through her work at various foundations.<sup>20</sup> She is a South Asian lesbian who moved from India to the U.S. with her family as a child and later attended Northeastern University's Law School.

Carmen Vazquez joined NGLTF's Board of Directors in 1990 and remained a board member through 1993. As a long-standing activist and advocate for LGBT-

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<sup>19</sup> "John D'Emilio Curriculum Vitae." <http://www.uic.edu/depts/hist/Faculty/d'emilio.htm> Accessed 7 October 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

friendly and supportive public policies, she had been in regular contact with the Task Force for years. Currently she is on the Policy Institute's National Policy Roundtable. She is a Puerto Rican butch lesbian who moved from Puerto Rico to New York City in her childhood, and who has also spent considerable time in San Francisco in her adulthood. Unfortunately, I had a problem with recording her interview, and so was only able to paraphrase the information she conveyed to me.<sup>21</sup>

### **Project Constraints**

This project began because I wanted to research something which was applicable to my non-academic activist work. Specifically, I wanted to address intersecting oppressions and how that could be done within a queer organizing model. Because NGLTF is well known for its progressive actions and staff, I decided to look at it. I started my research intending to address the question of how exactly NGLTF had become the most progressive national LGBT/queer advocacy organization. Once I realized that the Task Force had actually been founded as a conservative alternative to gay liberation groups, I became more intrigued by this question. However, as I did more research, I realized that the notable progressive actions and projects NGLTF had done were initiated and driven by individual staff members who had a personal investment in seeing them through. I also began to see that organizational attempts to address intersectional politics and engage in multi-issue organizing were scattered and appeared to be add-ons more than priorities. As a result, I began to investigate the

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<sup>21</sup> "Carmen Vazquez." *Pride Agenda, Inc.* <<http://www.prideagenda.org/staff/cvazquez.html>> Accessed 7 October 2007.

extent to which NGLTF actually lived up to its reputation as progressive beyond in comparison to other organizations.

This thesis adds to a surprisingly small body of literature focusing on the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Despite NGLTF's influence on the U.S. LGBT movement for over three decades, John D'Emilio is the only person to have written a published, peer-reviewed article focused exclusively on NGLTF. Only a handful of other authors—including Martin Duberman, Steve Endean, Scott Tucker, Urvashi Vaid (all of whom worked with NGLTF in its early years), Shane Phelan, and Craig Rimmerman, (both of whom are scholars doing work in LGBT/queer studies)—have even included NGLTF in any significant way in their memoirs and comparative analyses of LGBT/queer organizations. Given this context, and the extent to which I relied on primary sources, this essay is significant to the historical record. This essay also finds a place in the bodies of literature about the relationship between rights discourse, whiteness, and strategic use of language and representation within queer organizing while using NGLTF as an example of larger issues.

The limitations of this research are a result of time constraints. I had conducted research in the archives during the summer and fall of 2005, and have only been able to refer to what I photocopied and took notes on since then. Interviews I also did during the summer and fall of 2005, and have been in limited contact with the interview subjects since then because of their own busy lives and schedules. Because much of this history is simply unrecorded as yet, I could often only rely on the interviews for information that made sense of the archival materials or to cross-reference the extremely limited scholarly work published on NGLTF. An ideal

situation would have involved ongoing communication, but that was not possible because of their packed schedules. Furthermore, because the order in which I learned various bits of information, I was often not able to cross-check information with earlier interview subjects. A few examples of points I would like to further investigate include: Did NGLTF advocate around Marlon Riggs as well as Robert Mapplethorpe during the attacks on National Endowment for the Arts funding? How consciously did early organization chairs and executive directors consider how potential staff members might be received by legislators and the general public when hiring? How much energy was spent trying to involve queer people of color in anti-sodomy law repeal efforts, and how much was it assumed that queer people of color must have had their own reasons for not participating?

My argument and conclusions were also affected by my source material. While two of my six interview subjects were women of color (Vaid and Vasquez), I would have preferred to interview more people of color who had worked at or with NGLTF. The fact that a technical error meant I also lacked a recording of my interview with Carmen Vasquez also meant that I could only paraphrase Vasquez occasionally from my limited notes and memory. This was a significant hindrance to my thesis given that so much of what she said was relevant to my arguments, but not possible to use towards my conclusions because of the lack of transcript from which to quote. It also meant that four of my five interviews that I could reference were with white people, while I already had most of my primary and secondary sources from white people. With the exception of John D’Emilio, I was only able to interview people who had worked with NGLTF during or after the 1980s, leaving me with more

unanswered questions about the organization's early years. Another limitation to my research is that because I did not look at the organizational budgets while in the archives, I can only guess how NGLTF has allocated its resources based on what projects the direct and my own experience working on the Creating Change conference and seeing a part of the Organizing and Training Team in action. I would need a more in depth analysis of organizational budget, allocation of staff time, and directives from the board and executive director to prove beyond doubt that NGLTF has not allocated its resources in a way that reflects the mission in a meaningful way and demonstrates the vision as a priority for the organization to achieve.

### **History of NGLTF**

The National Gay Task Force (NGTF) was founded in 1973 in New York City as the first organization focused on obtaining equality for gay people on a national level. According to a 1997 interview with an unidentified National Gay and Lesbian Task Force official cited by scholar Craig A. Rimmerman,<sup>22</sup> it was intended to “fill the void where no national work was being done on behalf of gays’...to bring ‘gay liberation into the mainstream of American civil rights’ and to ‘focus on broad national issues’...[and to] provide[] advice to local groups and served as a clearinghouse for information.”<sup>23</sup> For tax purposes, the National Gay Task Force was established in 1973 as a non-political, non-profit organization. NGTF's lobbying side

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<sup>22</sup> Craig A. Rimmerman has been a professor of public policy studies and political science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges since 1986, according to “Craig Rimmerman.” *Hobart and William Smith Colleges*. <<http://www.hws.edu/news/experts/displayexpert.asp?expertid=31>> Accessed 7 October 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Rimmerman, Craig A. “Beyond Political Mainstreaming: Reflections on National Lesbian and Gay Organizations and the Grassroots.” *The Politics of Gay Rights*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. Page 62.

was then established in 1974 as a political action committee, and specifically to be a “‘social welfare’ organization legally authorized to engage in significant grassroots and direct lobbying to either help defeat anti-LGBT ballot initiatives and other measures or help push pro-LGBT legislation and other measures.”<sup>24</sup> This suggests that some wealthy people were immediately a part of NGLTF as founders or donors, because non-profit organizations that begin with fewer than ten founding members usually need to wait a few years before building up the capacity and/or financial support to obtain a lobbying branch, rather than establishing this arm within a few months of being founded.

Throughout its existence, NGLTF has maintained a tradition of staying connected with the greater LGBT/queer community and of supporting the work of local activists around the country. It has also never claimed a one particular method or strategy for social change, instead engaging in different ways in various situations.

Scholar Craig Rimmerman writes,

It was combining outsider and insider stances into an elegantly choreographed—and compellingly innovative—strategy for change... It lobbied and it agitated. It negotiated and it mobilized. It supported breaking the law and changing the law. It tinkered with the system to effect small immediate changes, and it expressed a commitment to a more expansive vision of social justice.<sup>25</sup>

Rimmerman adds that even with a national office in D.C. and a board of directors that is involved in directing the work of the organization in a legally-recognized hierarchical manner, of the national LGBT/queer organizations he recognizes—including the Human Rights Campaign, NGLTF, the National Black Lesbian and Gay

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<sup>24</sup> “Task Force History.” *National Gay and Lesbian Task Force*. <<http://thetaskforce.org/aboutus/history.cfm#1980>> Accessed 7 October 2007.

<sup>25</sup> D’Emilio, John. “Organizational Tales: Interpreting the NGLTF Story.” *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. Page 101-102.



Leadership Forum, the Log Cabin Republicans, Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund—he asserts that, “the Task Force is most committed to grassroots political and social change,”<sup>26</sup> and gains more strength from combining that broad base with lobbying efforts in the nation’s capital.

One example of this commitment is the Creating Change conference, which has been organized by NGLTF since 1988 and remains the only annual national conference for LGBT/queer activists to come, talk, and learn from one another. This is also where much of the communication that occurs between NGLTF, state and local organizations, and individual activists happens. Some activists question the actual amount of communication that may transpire between NGLTF staff and board members and other LGBT/queer advocacy organizations and activists at Creating Change because of the responsibilities staff have during the conference. Nonetheless, it does put people who are not involved with NGLTF in touch both with NGLTF staff and board members and with non-NGLTF activists doing relevant work on any particular issue, which improves connections and intra-movement communication outside of the conference space. Additionally, NGLTF has always relied heavily on actual meetings with state organizations and national groups to ensure that Creating Change is a chance for communication, but certainly not the one chance a year non-NGLTF-affiliated activists have to be heard by NGLTF.

Connected to NGLTF’s commitment to grassroots work, NGLTF has also demonstrated a long-lasting commitment to incorporating gender and race in its work around gay and lesbian rights both programmatically and as documented in Board

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<sup>26</sup> Rimmerman, Craig A. “Beyond Political Mainstreaming: Reflections on National Lesbian and Gay Organizations and the Grassroots.” *The Politics of Gay Rights*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. Page 64.

resolutions, internal communication, and mission statements. In 1979, NGTF co-sponsored the “first national conference of Third World gays and lesbians, which spurred autonomous organizing in the 1980s within people of color communities.”<sup>27</sup> In 1985, the organization changed its name to reflect its investment in lesbian issues and more widely acknowledge the importance they had already placed on gender parity for years. This name change reflected a commitment to the number of women involved in NGLTF which was already present, but did not address the extent to which lesbians in the organization were allowed a voice. By the late 1980s, though, NGLTF had gained enough feminist involvement in the organization that men speaking over and disregarding what women were saying was rarely a concern.<sup>28</sup> It took NGLTF until the early 1990s to begin to move beyond a place of tokenizing people of color to a place where the role of racism in the organization was acknowledged, and the staff and board continue to have much work to do regarding race and racism. To demonstrate its commitment to seeing people of color amongst the leaders of the LGBT/queer movement, in 1995 NGLTF convened its first Progressive People of Color Grassroots Organizers Summit, and in 2000 began the Racial and Economic Justice Program, most clearly manifested in the projects of the Policy Institute. Further, all Creating Change conferences since 2002 have all had the theme of, “Building an Anti-Racist Movement: Working for Social and Economic Justice.” Since the late 1990s NGLTF has also incorporated transgender rights and issues into its focus, and currently has a Transgender Civil Rights Project. NGLTF has been criticized both by moderates and progressives, for addressing issues deemed

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<sup>27</sup> “Task Force History.” *National Gay and Lesbian Task Force*.  
<<http://thetaskforce.org/aboutus/history.cfm#1980>> Accessed 7 October 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Sue Hyde, interview by author, digital recording in person, 27 July 2005.

outside traditional lesbian and gay issues, and for superficially addressing social justice by failing to “walk the walk,”<sup>29</sup> respectively.

In January 2004, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force changed its Internet domain name and logo to “The Task Force,” in an attempt to convey the organization’s “mission of fighting for transgendered people, bisexuals, intersex people, and those who are ‘questioning’ their sexual orientation as well as gay men and lesbians.”<sup>30</sup> This also concluded a five year process of reevaluating the organization’s mission, vision, and agenda. Current executive director Matt Foreman noted, “the name National Gay & Lesbian Task Force will be retained because it is rooted in history, just as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is linked to the history of the African-American civil rights movement.”<sup>31</sup> The strategic plan approved in 2003, was the first to explicitly include “LGBT” and a commitment to combating biphobia and transphobia. However, the Creating Change conference has been for LGBT activists throughout the 1990s, with bisexual and transgender activists and organizations recognized there regularly for the last fifteen years. Bisexual activists and transgender activists have also served on NGLTF’s Board of Directors and worked on the staff in recent years, with Lani Ka’ahumanu, a well-known bi activist, serving on the board from 1997 to 2000, and Marsha Botzer, a transgender activist, serving on the board from 2000 to the present.

Although NGLTF’s “primary mission is to fight for the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, NGLTF has billed itself as a progressive, social

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<sup>29</sup> Carmen Vazquez, interview by author, notes taken throughout phone interview due to failed digital recording, October 14 October 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Chibbaro Jr., Lou. “NGLTF: not just for gays anymore?” *New York Blade*, January 9, 2004: 12 <<http://web2.epnet.com.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu>> Accessed 7 October 2007.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

justice organization that works on some non-gay issues by recognizing ‘linkages between oppressions based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.’”<sup>32</sup> And while many people do recognize the significant amount of resources that NGLTF allocates to addressing intersecting oppressions and building leadership within marginalized communities, many activists also believe that NGLTF could be doing a great deal more, and that other national LGBT/queer advocacy organizations should be doing even more because they have so much more room to improve. If other organizations did more of this work (as they should), NGLTF would seem less “ahead,” and would actually have to work to be seen as a progressive organization committed to social justice instead of being allowed to assume that position in contrast to the other more moderate national LGBT/queer advocacy groups. “Walking the walk,” if NGLTF were to more consistently do it, might include directing a greater amount of money, support, and resources towards building leadership from communities of color and national LGBT/queer people of color organizations (especially, Carmen Vazquez noted, in comparison to marriage as an issue),<sup>33</sup> or a greater number of people of color on staff, more transgender people on staff, and more resources dedicated to helping state and local groups ensure a similar commitment to social justice and understand why that is important.

At the same time, NGLTF does maintain a commitment to social justice as codified in its revised 1991 mission statement, and is also recognized as far ahead of most other national LGBT/queer organizations, while also continuing to improve

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<sup>32</sup> Chibbaro Jr., Lou. “NGLTF: not just for gays anymore?” *New York Blade*, January 9, 2004: 12 <<http://web2.epnet.com.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu>> Accessed 7 October 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Carmen Vazquez, interview by author, notes taken throughout phone interview due to failed digital recording, October 14 October 2005.

itself based on suggestions and critiques from staff and membership.<sup>34</sup> Sean Cahill, current director of the Policy Institute, stated,

I think we share a genuine commitment to...social justice, economic justice. And I think that we've set our priorities and that a lot of people come here ready to comment...when we first started out, the National Gay Task Force was seen as this conservative, inside the Belt,...sort of conservative lobby group. And obviously that's not what we are anymore.<sup>35</sup>

He recognizes that the Task Force did not start out with the commitment to social justice it now has, and that that shift has been a gradual one that continues to attract like-minded people who maintain and strengthen that vision.

### **Thesis Structure**

My thesis begins by examining the historical context in which NGLTF was founded. I review what else was happening at the time in terms of gay and lesbian political organizing and other social movements and examine who the people who founded what was then the National Gay Task Force were. I acknowledge the work the organization did to try and include the perspectives of “women” (white) and “Third World” (U.S. based people of color, most often men), as well as how those were both challenges for the organization. I show that NGLTF began in the 1970s by focusing on issues and using strategies that helped create the foundation for the contemporary mainstream, white dominated, middle/upper class lesbian and gay agenda that has continued to be prevalent in LGBT national organizing since the 1990s.

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<sup>34</sup> From interviews with Sue Hyde, July 27, 2005, and Urvashi Vaid, October 10, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Sean Cahill, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 19 September 2005

In the second chapter, I look at how NGLTF addressed having to sometimes talk about sexual behaviors with negative connotations associated with lesbian and gay people. Talking at least somewhat about sexual behaviors and how they related to gay and lesbian people was unavoidable because the major gay political issues in the late 1980s were repealing old and preventing new anti-sodomy legislation and responding to the AIDS epidemic. The Christian Right's attacks—led by the Christian Coalition and similar extremely conservative non-denominational religious organizations—on any work that was perceived to be supportive of homosexuality was heavily targeted, which also raised the issue of censorship in funding guidelines for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). This was most notably in response to the Christian Coalition's highlighting the contents of a documentary photography exhibit which included depictions of the BDSM/leather community and explicit acts of penetration. Because Robert Mapplethorpe, the artist, had received some NEA funding over the years, and his photographs were fairly extreme in their depictions, the Christian Coalition sent copies of some of his photographs to all members of the US Congress to jostle support for the NEA. I will show that while forced to address sexual behaviors because of anti-sodomy laws and the AIDS epidemic, NGLTF nonetheless maintained a mainstream civil rights focus, only allowing individual staff members to initiate some connections to sexual liberation rhetoric within the safer realm of queer communities.

My third and final chapter examines how NGLTF has positioned itself as being committed to addressing racial and economic justice since the late 1980s. I will specifically look at what the organization has accomplished and why this

commitment has been voiced. I acknowledge that NGLTF has done an impressive amount of multi-issue organizing and that it is far better at coalition work and staff comprehension about intersecting issues and identities than its peer organizations. Nonetheless, I argue that despite all that, NGLTF has undertaken this effort through add-ons rather than by implementing structural change or a significant reallocation of organizational resources.

Even this ineffective attempt at multi-issue organizing is precisely what Gittings and Kameny objected to in their answer to my question to them at their Yale presentation. They firmly believe that single-issue politics are the way to go, and that for LGBT/queer people to gain civil rights and social acceptance, LGBT/queer advocacy organizations need to focus first and foremost on issues that impact the entire LGBT/queer community rather than what they would likely consider “minority interests.” The irony of their answer, however, is that in many ways NGLTF *has* “stuck to its task” by always prioritizing issues which fail to take into account intersecting identities or systems of oppression and only focus on a marginalized LGBT/queer identity.

## Chapter One

### And So It All Begins: NGTF in the Early Years

The Task Force has been the organization that has been at the forefront, and we have served to either create or lay the groundwork for almost all the LGBT infrastructure that exists today [according to former NGLTF executive directors Lorri Jean]. NGLTF New England Field Organizer Sue Hyde put it another way: ‘NGLTF put the move in the LGBT movement,’ she said. ‘To me, what this organization has contributed to the movement is to very consistently take up an issue that is not well developed and developing it so that others begin to take it seriously and do work on it.’<sup>36</sup>

Since the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) was founded in 1973 as one of the first national gay organizations, it has been indeed been at the forefront of the movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBT/queer) equality. The above quotation, from an article recognizing the first three decades of accomplishments and effort on the part of the Task Force, quotes activists who have a long-running involvement with NGLTF. Sue Hyde, for example, was first hired to work for NGLTF in 1986 as the director of the Privacy Project, but has since moved to directing NGLTF’s annual Creating Change conference after taking a short hiatus from the organization in the early 1990s. Lorri Jean has been actively involved with NGLTF since the early 1990s, but has a long history of LGBT/queer activism in general preceding her. Hyde also references how NGLTF has often focused on an issue affecting the LGBT/queer community and by doing so brought national attention to it, like the issue of gay people in the military and protecting the rights of LGBT/queer parents. However, it has only been able to bring attention to “new” issues because of how all the major national LGBT/queer

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<sup>36</sup> Giordano, Scott A. “NGLTF celebrates thirty years of creating change.” *Bay Windows*, 27 February 2003, Vol. 21, Issue 11.



advocacy organizations fall into the habit of prioritizing the needs and interests of white, upper class gay men over all others. Because NGLTF has had progressive people on staff since the late 1980s, though, at different times individual staff members have tried to highlight issues other organizations are missing. Yet even though the Task Force is comparatively better than the other national organizations, it too has also fallen into the pattern of setting its own organizational agenda and allocation of resources according to what prioritizes the needs of white middle or upper class gay men over those with less privileged identities.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force was founded by a small group of educated, middle or upper class white gay men and lesbians as one of the first national gay advocacy organizations. It provided an alternative for activists interested in equality who were frustrated by or opposed to working with self-described “gay liberation” groups, including the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance. NGLTF’s founders were driven to found the Task Force because of the frustration they felt with the scope of specifically the Gay Liberation Front’s organizing and how the meetings were run. In response, they created something that was genuinely unique inasmuch as it drastically departed from the kind of support or consciousness raising groups that most gay organizations of the time were, yet also failed to return to the apologist stance of some homophile groups. As a result, the Task Force was comparatively considered the most palatable to people with power. Accordingly, it has set the “gay agenda” in the mid to late 1970s, which has served as the foundation for the mainstream gay and lesbian agenda in the USA throughout the 1980s and into the present. Throughout, but most notably in the first decade and a

half or so of its existence, the people and images NGLTF chose to put forth to legislators and broader straight society were predominantly of white, easily-assimilable and “straight-passing”<sup>37</sup> gay men and lesbians with other privileges like socio-economic class and educational background. This was done very strategically in an attempt to gain support for civil rights legislation and policy reforms to protect gay people by appealing to legislators in very traditional, mainstream ways.

In this chapter, I show how the issues NGLTF chose to focus on in the 1970s created the foundation for what has been the visible national lesbian and gay agenda through to the 1990s, which has been a very mainstream, white dominated, middle and upper class lesbian and gay agenda. First, I provide an overview of the historical context, discussing the positive and negative aspects of agitating for gay liberation as distinct from advocating for gay civil rights, and the tensions between the two schools of activist strategies. I then examine the people who founded the National Gay Task Force (NGTF) and the organization’s initial vision and mission. Next I explore how NGTF dealt with critical questions of gender parity, “Third World” representation, and coalitions with other civil rights organizations in the 1970s and early 1980s. I also account for how NGTF’s issues and actions—particularly their work with the American Psychiatric Association, the executive branch of the federal government, and the 1979 March on Washington planning committee—all served to shape a national “LGBT” agenda that maintained the visibility of white and otherwise

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<sup>37</sup> “Straight-passing” refers to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people who present themselves predominantly in gender-conforming ways (gender variance not being the same as a non-straight sexual orientation, but often being assumed to be) and lacking in behaviors stereotypically associated with gay men and lesbians. This could include lacking a lisp or certain wrist movements for a gay man or lacking a history of participation on softball or rugby teams for a lesbian. Because “straight-passing” queer people lack the markers that straight people use to assume someone is not straight, they can choose how “out” they want to be about their sexual orientation by how much they talk about it or otherwise make that clear (for example, though buttons or posters).

privileged gay men and lesbians. This national gay and lesbian agenda has privileged whiteness most consistently by maintaining whiteness' invisibility while repeatedly choosing to represent the LGBT/queer community as being composed primarily of white, middle to upper class gay people. This was further reinforced because the lesbian and gay activists who worked in national, mostly mainstream, LGBT/queer advocacy organizations tended to think first of "gay" issues which benefited what they saw the most people. Yet because of how white privilege functions to simultaneously make whiteness invisible and still privilege white people, when these activists were considering the "most people" of the community, they tended to think first of the relatively gender conforming, white, class-privileged gay men and lesbians who were the majority of their membership and the representatives their organizations were putting forth. While these issues do indeed affect queer people of color and other queer people with less privilege, who has been included in the imagined/visible gay community has continued to impact the items that were or were not put on the national gay agenda and with what tactics agenda items were pursued. This is all significant because of NGTF's influence on "the LGBT movement," including its part in creating a white dominated, class privileged national LGBT agenda.

### **Historical context**

The 1969 Stonewall Riot in New York City's Greenwich Village is commonly imagined as the marker of the beginning of the modern gay and lesbian political

struggle within the United States of America.<sup>38</sup> While a handful of gay and lesbian advocacy, educational, and support groups existed around the country for “homophiles” before Stonewall, they were very scattered and largely unknown. The term “homophile” was specifically chosen rather than the more commonly understood word, “homosexual,” to shift the definition to same-sex love rather than “sex.” It was a deliberate attempt by “such [homophile organizations] as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis [to] present[] homosexuality as dignified, nonthreatening, and assimilable to the mainstream....[and] to desexualize (and therefore render less troubling) homosexuality in the eyes of the dominant culture.”<sup>39</sup> These homophile organizations further distanced themselves from negative connotations of homosexuality by using names with literary or mythological references to same-sex desire too obscure for the general public to automatically register. The Stonewall Riot highlights a turning point for the LGBT/queer movement, marking the shift from homophile organizing to gay liberation.

The gay liberation movement, most active throughout the 1970s, was itself born out of the social context of the 1960s and 1970s. Scholar Richard Meyer notes; “Modeling itself on the women’s liberation and black power movements, gay liberation sought to link homosexual freedom to a larger vision of revolutionary change in which all hierarchies of social, economic, and sexual power would be

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<sup>38</sup> The Stonewall Riot was gender variant queer people fighting back against the police raid of the gay bar The Stonewall Inn. This was noteworthy because for many years police raids had happened without a unified resistance. However, the resistance was spontaneous and received limited attention, so is imagined as marking the beginning of the modern gay and lesbian movement without sufficient evidence of whether it was the causation or merely happened at the same period due to other groundwork that had already been laid.

<sup>39</sup> Meyer, Richard. *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Page 165.

leveled.”<sup>40</sup> Homophile groups were first founded in the 1950s before social movements for women’s rights and Black civil rights had really seen widespread societal recognition or success. As a result of this historical context and the fact that the visible homophile activists were overwhelmingly privileged white people, they relied on actions which “stressed responsible citizenship while seeking social and legal reforms that would improve the lives of homosexual people.”<sup>41</sup> The Stonewall Riot and the gay liberation activism that followed it took place after radical anti-war protests, the Black Power movement, and other social movements had opened up an alternative way of seeking change. As a result gay liberationists sought “a full-tilt social and sexual revolution”<sup>42</sup> far beyond what homophile activists had aimed to achieve.

Gay liberation politics dramatically changed the LGBT/queer movement because of what it emphasized and what goals it sought. Historian John D’Emilio notes that in the years immediately following Stonewall,

the gay and lesbian movement...evolved from one emphasizing gay liberation to one emphasizing gay rights. Within that shift in terminology lies a major alteration in social analysis, political strategy, and ultimate goals. In its gay liberation phase, the lesbian and gay movement employed a language of political radicalism. It saw itself as one piece of a much larger political impulse that strove for a complete reorganization of institution, values, and the structure of power in American life. Gay liberation sought to achieve its aims by organizing masses of gay men and lesbians whose political activity would occur largely outside courts and legislatures. These activists viewed accepted categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality as oppressive social constructs. The movement perceived human sexuality as diffuse and

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<sup>40</sup> Meyer, Richard. *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Page 159.

<sup>41</sup> Meyer, Richard. *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Page 165.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

polymorphous in nature, and potentially destructive of rigid social hierarchies.<sup>43</sup>

Homophile organizations were notable for their work in emphasizing privacy and the normalcy of homosexual identity as a political strategy. In contrast, gay liberation politics during this period focused on “public visibility, exploration of personal growth, and understanding that oppression based on sexual identity took place in a broader social context.”<sup>44</sup> Gay liberation groups also espoused the interconnectedness of oppressions, the resulting importance of working in coalition with groups fighting racism and sexism, and a deep distrust of state structures and power which resulted in rhetoric about global citizens rather than just U.S. citizens, and a general lack of engagement with the U.S. political process.<sup>45</sup> It is important to recognize here that the emphasis on intersecting oppressions that the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in particular stressed also functioned as a double-edged sword that caused the group’s demise. D’Emilio notes,

For many white lesbians and for [gay and lesbian] people of color, GLF offered too little: it could not adequately address their needs as individuals who experienced not only gay oppression, but also sexism, racism, or both. For many white gay men, GLF demanded too much. Just as they were awakening to a political consciousness of their oppression and beginning to fashion an agenda for action, GLF was calling for a commitment to fight all forms of oppression. The insistence on solidarity with the struggles of others too easily sounded like self-abnegation.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> D’Emilio, John. “Making and Unmaking Minorities: The Tensions Between Gay History and Politics” from D’Emilio, John. *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*. New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 181-190. (Reprinted from the *Review of Law and Social Change*, 14 (1986): 915-922.) Page 181-182.

<sup>44</sup> Bronski, Michael. *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998. Page 67.

<sup>45</sup> Bronski, Michael. *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998. Page 68.

<sup>46</sup> From: D’Emilio, John. “After Stonewall.” from D’Emilio, John. *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*. New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 234-274. (Written in 1991.) Page 245-246.

His assessment highlights the influence that privilege played in how people perceived oppression, as well as that there was no “happy medium” or compromise that satisfied both privileged and less privileged gay men and lesbians. This is also noteworthy since the same privileged white gay men who were too challenged by GLF felt comfortable with NGTF’s perspective. It provides a clear indication that certainly before NGTF became NGLTF, its work to diversify their board was about tokenization (however well-intentioned it may have been at the time) rather than challenging both institutional and individual racism and sexism. NGLTF faced similar seemingly oppositional criticisms from time to time since the late 1980s, particularly under the leadership of Urvashi Vaid, who began much of her activism with gay liberationists and other more progressive/radical activists and tried to have NGLTF address intersecting oppressions and multiple identities.

Stonewall also raised LGBT/queer visibility and public awareness, serving to encourage many people to “come out”<sup>47</sup> D’Emilio believes that gay liberation’s emphasis on the importance of coming out was “a tactical stroke of genius.”<sup>48</sup>

Here was a decision that any gay person could make. The results were personally transformative, and the consequences socially significant. People who came out were relinquishing the one protection that gays had against stigmatization. They therefore required new forms of self-defense, which is precisely what a gay liberation movement was. Once out of the closet, a gay man or lesbian was heavily invested in the success of the movement. Coming out created an army of permanent recruits.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> D’Emilio explains “coming out” as having different meanings before and after the Stonewall Riot: “Before Stonewall, the phrase has signified the acknowledgement of one’s sexuality to others in the gay world; after Stonewall, it meant the public affirmation of homosexual identity.” From: D’Emilio, John. “After Stonewall.” from D’Emilio, John. *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*. New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 234-274. (Written in 1991.) Page 244.

<sup>48</sup> D’Emilio, John. “After Stonewall.” from D’Emilio, John. *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*. New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 234-274. (Written in 1991.) Page 244.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

Many newly out gays and lesbians supported gay liberation groups “because they were already converts to a radical critique of American society [and thus unintimidated by] the usual penalties that kept gays and lesbians in line.”<sup>50</sup> However, many newly out people often felt uncomfortable with the broader political critique of gay liberation. Thus, “moderate gay and lesbian activists were able to form new political organizations to harness this [otherwise untapped] energy, [so] an unexpected legacy of Stonewall was the formation of two mainstream gay rights organizations [NGTF and Lambda Legal] in 1973.”<sup>51</sup> Since Stonewall was so radically different from homophile organization’s tactics, this return to a mainstream assimilationist strategy was a surprising outcome of the large numbers of newly out LGBT/queer people resulting from the increased visibility and public awareness the Stonewall Riot brought to the LGBT/queer movement.

Gay activist Steve Endean says the shift between gay liberation and gay civil rights was a strategic word choice. He was one of the members of NGTF’s first board of directors who was active in the national lesbian and gay political movement and national LGBT/queer organizations from the early 1970s to early 1990s.

The term in those early days was ‘gay liberation,’ but I worked to shift it to ‘gay civil rights’ because I thought the term ‘liberation’ seemed foreign to most people. Without much conscious analysis, I sensed our victories would come in direct relationship to how well we were able to move the issue of lesbian and gay civil rights into the mainstream; I opted for gay civil rights, because I thought it more effectively conveyed our mission of securing nondiscrimination. Could we reach the broad middle ground of people who probably weren’t ready for gay marriage and gay adoption, let alone cross-dressing? Even in the early 1970s, I believed most Americans believed in

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<sup>50</sup> D’Emilio, John. “After Stonewall.” from D’Emilio, John. *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*. New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 234-274. (Written in 1991.) Page 244.

<sup>51</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. 61)



fairness and agreed someone doing a good job shouldn't be fired from their jobs or evicted because of their sexual orientation.<sup>52</sup>

That Endean thought that the term “liberation” would seem “foreign” to people indicates that his intended audience would be people privileged enough not to already be involved in any liberation movements. The shift between talking about gay liberation to gay civil rights took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s, by which liberation would have been a term familiar with most people, and was widely used by people involved in feminist and Black Power struggles. Liberation likely seemed foreign as a concept to those in power not because they could not understand it, but because it was not something they would want to grant racial minorities. For legislators and others in power to support a minority group's liberation would seem too threatening to their own positions of power and privilege. It was also assumed that supporting a minority group's liberation was too farfetched for straight people with less power to stand behind because it could threaten the heterosexual privilege they received. Endean's understanding of liberation as “foreign” is a clear example of what Bérubé would call a “gay whitening practice” that in this case functioned here to efface the liberation and freedom struggles of people of color in particular in order to present a whiter, and thus assumedly more palatable, image of the LGBT/queer community. This analysis also follows from Endean's belief that, “victories would come in direct relationship to how well we were able to move the issue of lesbian and gay civil rights into the mainstream,”<sup>53</sup> and his assumption that the politically social moderates would be able to support gay civil rights as long as it did not go “too far.”

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<sup>52</sup> Endean, Steve. *Bringing Lesbian and Gay Rights into the Mainstream: Twenty Years of Progress*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006. Page 12.

<sup>53</sup> Endean, Steve. *Bringing Lesbian and Gay Rights into the Mainstream: Twenty Years of Progress*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006. Page 12.

Gaining or maintaining support from politically social moderates is assumed to require LGBT/queer people's assimilation into heteronormative ways of living, because some agenda items were simply too radical to be supported by most people, and might even cost the movement support from moderates if included at all.

Civil rights language also made sense given the work NGTF and other national gay organizations were then focused on through public education. Throughout the 1970s, these foci were decriminalizing sodomy, disassociating homosexuality from medical/mental disorders, and advancing legislative anti-discrimination protections. While these are all a part of liberation, it is important to remember that "being legal," or having legal rights and protections, is different than "being free," or having one's identities actively supported and affirmed. While legal rights are a necessary baseline, having legal protections only really protects people on paper. It allows people in protected classes the opportunity to pursue a complaint of discrimination should they have the money, time, legal knowledge, sense of entitlement, and energy required to do so. Yet there is certainly no guarantee that anything ever be done as a result of a complaint of discrimination, and only even the chance that something will be done if harmful intention as well as action and effect have been demonstrated, which is actually a high bar to reach for discrimination.<sup>54</sup> Liberation, however, would presumably encompass protection *and* affirmation for LGBT/queer individuals in variety of areas.

The main source of tension between gay liberationists and gay civil rights advocates came from the civil rights advocates. While some gay liberationists no

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<sup>54</sup> Williams, Patricia J. *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. Page 148-161.

doubt considered civil rights advocates to be aiming “too low” or possibly selling out to assimilationist politics, many realized that obtaining civil rights was a step in the right direction. However, civil rights advocates often sought to gain support by laying claim to LGBT/queer people being “normal” or otherwise similar to people in power. Gay liberation seemed far too radical for them, and was likely to make them lose support for their work if people thought gay liberation was the hidden or “real”/long-term agenda.

Gay liberation never thought of itself as a civil rights movement for a particular minority but as a revolutionary struggle to free the homosexuality in everyone, challenging the conventional arrangements that confined sexuality to heterosexual, monogamous families. For gay liberation, there was no ‘normal’ or ‘perverse’ sexuality, only a world of sexual possibilities ranged against a repressive order of marriage, oedipal families, and compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>55</sup>

Precisely because gay liberation desired to dismantle the systems around which straight, mainstream society organized itself, some civil rights advocates thought of the very existence of gay liberation as more of an impediment to their successfully gaining equal civil rights for gay and lesbian people than a help.

### **NGLTF’s Beginnings**

When the National Gay Task Force was incorporated on November 6, 1973,<sup>56</sup> it was intended to be a mainstream organization. Yet it had the lofty goal of making “it possible for all people to recognize and exercise their human options, free from

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<sup>55</sup> Adam, Barry D. *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement. Revised Edition.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995. Page 84.

<sup>56</sup> Certificate of Incorporation of the National Gay Task Force, Inc., 6 November 1973 Box 1, Folder 1), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001).

societally [sic] imposed limitations based on affectional [sic] and sexual preference or orientation or gender role.”<sup>57</sup> As documented, the founders aimed to:

- (a) to establish a program of education among homosexual men and women in order to promote an understanding of their status in contemporary America thereby increasing their self esteem and sense of worth and advancing their human and social potentials;
- (b) to establish a program of education with the public to increase understanding of homosexual persons, their social problems and their contributions as useful and productive members of society;
- (c) to establish task forces to systematically analyze and evaluate the special problems of homosexual women and men and to make recommendations and evolve strategies to solve these problems; and
- (d) to do any and all other things appropriate and proper for the furtherance of its purposes.<sup>58</sup>

While this statement seems expansive, the founders also regularly limited themselves to working within the legal process. The ways in which they intended to achieve change was also indicative of their assimilationist desires, because forming task forces to do research and make recommendations that may or may not be implemented is far too patient and bureaucratic, with far too little payoff or accountability for gay liberationists to agree to. So while NGTF founders stated that they wanted to address their vision by “changing societal and personal attitudes..., disseminating information and clearinghouse function..., gay civil rights advocacy..., gay organizing..., increasing lesbian visibility..., and organizational nurturance,”<sup>59</sup> they maintained a mainstream organization. According to a 1997 interview with an unidentified National Gay and Lesbian Task Force official cited by political scientist

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<sup>57</sup> Statement of Purpose, 1976 Box 1, Folder 2), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001).

<sup>58</sup> “Task Force History.” *National Gay and Lesbian Task Force*.  
<<http://thetaskforce.org/aboutus/history.cfm#1980>> Accessed 7 October 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Statement of Purpose, 1976 Box 1, Folder 2), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001).

Craig A. Rimmerman,<sup>60</sup> it was intended to ““fill the void where no national work was being done on behalf of gays’ ...The organization’s initial goals were to bring ‘gay liberation into the mainstream of American civil rights’ and to ‘focus on broad national issues.’ ...[as well as to] provide[] advice to local groups and serve[] as a clearinghouse for information.”<sup>61</sup> The only other national gay advocacy organization in the USA was Lambda Legal, focused on courtroom battles and also founded in 1973. Former NGLTF executive director Lorri Jean recalls that; ““Basically, the Task Force was doing everything else.””<sup>62</sup>

Nonetheless, NGTF’s mission and bylaws indicated an organizational commitment to achieving full equality for gay and lesbian people. In terms of legally-recognized tax status, the National Gay Task Force was established in 1973, with NGTF’s lobbying side being established as the National Gay Task Force, Inc. in 1974 as a ““social welfare’ organization legally authorized to engage in significant grassroots and direct lobbying to either help defeat anti-LGBT ballot initiatives and other measures or help push pro-LGBT legislation and other measures””<sup>63</sup>. The organization’s by-laws were ratified on June 13, 1976, and presented slightly rephrased purposes. The revised by-laws more specifically demonstrate NGTF’s interest in achieving “*full* civil and human rights and *full equality* for gay people, by elimination of existing discriminatory laws and policies and by creation of affirmative

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<sup>60</sup> Craig A. Rimmerman has been a professor of public policy studies and political science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges since 1986, according to “Craig Rimmerman.” *Hobart and William Smith Colleges*. <<http://www.hws.edu/news/experts/displayexpert.asp?expertid=31>>

<sup>61</sup> Rimmerman, Craig A. “Beyond Political Mainstreaming: Reflections on National Lesbian and Gay Organizations and the Grassroots.” *The Politics of Gay Rights*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. Page 62.

<sup>62</sup> Giordano, Scott A. “NGLTF celebrates thirty years of creating change.” *Bay Windows*, 27 February 2003, Vol. 21, Issue 11.

<sup>63</sup> “Task Force History.” *National Gay and Lesbian Task Force*. <<http://thetaskforce.org/aboutus/history.cfm#1980>> Accessed 7 October 2007.

laws and policies” and “*positive* attitudes about gay people and homosexuality”<sup>64</sup>, both markedly different than the earlier, more neutral expressed desires to advocate for civil rights and to encourage better general understanding about homosexuality (emphasis added). The by-laws ratified in 1976 also noted that NGTF opposed “the assignment of characteristics and roles on the basis of gender, and the discrimination that results from this.”<sup>65</sup> This shift marked a gradually increasing interest in gender dynamics within the organization and movement, which was no doubt brought about by the radical feminist movement at the time.

Only a handful of gay organizations existed in the USA before NGTF, and those were spread throughout the country. The first known gay organization within the USA was the Chicago Society for Human Rights, which also the first to “put forward the question of civil rights for gay people, though abundant evidence points toward a well-developed gay underground in all the major cities.”<sup>66</sup> It was founded in 1924 and shut down as a result of police intimidation. The first sustainable American gay organization, Los Angeles’ the Mattachine Society, was founded in 1951. San Francisco’s Daughters of Bilitis, the first known lesbian organization in America, was founded in 1955. Branches of the Mattachine Society were also founded in New York City and Washington, D.C. NGTF co-founder Frank Kameny actually founded the D.C. group in 1961. Somewhat surprising given his conservative opinions while involved with NGTF, in 1964 Kameny challenged the NY group on its assumptions

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<sup>64</sup> By-Laws of the National Gay Task Force, Inc, “Article II: Purposes,” 13 June 1976 Box 1, Folder 6), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001).

<sup>65</sup> By-Laws of the National Gay Task Force, Inc, “Article II: Purposes,” 13 June 1976 Box 1, Folder 6), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001).

<sup>66</sup> Adam, Barry D. *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement. Revised Edition.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995. Page 77. Page 42-43.

that to achieve respect, rights, and acceptance, the group needed to “lose the label of homosexual organizations.”<sup>67</sup> He is credited with first using the phrase “Gay is good,” during this exchange with the New York Mattachine Society.

The 1969 Stonewall Riot is often understood to mark the turning point in gay and lesbian political organizing. According to historian John D’Emilio, in 1969 there were “perhaps fifty gay and lesbian social change organizations in the United States. By 1973, four years after Stonewall, there were more than 800.”<sup>68</sup> Many of the founders of the groups that formed between 1969 and 1973 “produced a new kind of writing about homosexuality, one that used the language of oppression, that analyzed sexuality and gender roles as mechanisms of inequality, and that argued for the relationship between gay oppression and other forms of social injustice.”<sup>69</sup> The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) specifically set as its statement of purpose:

We are a revolutionary group of men and women formed with the realization that complete sexual liberation for all people cannot come about unless existing social institutions are abolished. We reject society's attempt to impose sexual roles and definitions of our nature.<sup>70</sup>

This vision was markedly different from both the homophiles that preceded the GLF and the civil rights driven NGTF that followed on its heels, with GLF being interested in systemic institutional change beyond reform. Yet this understanding of oppression and social justice influenced NGTF’s founders who then broke new ground by having

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<sup>67</sup> Adam, Barry D. *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement. Revised Edition.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995. Page 77.

<sup>68</sup> D’Emilio, John. “Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy: The Gay and Lesbian Movement After 50 Years.” *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. Page 83.

<sup>69</sup> D’Emilio, John. “Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy: The Gay and Lesbian Movement After 50 Years.” *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. Page 82-83.

<sup>70</sup> Bateman, Geoffrey W. “Gay Liberation Front.” *GLBTQ: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, & Queer Culture,* 2005. <[http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/gay\\_liberation\\_front.html](http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/gay_liberation_front.html)> Accessed 19 January 2007.

NGTF address issues of concern or interest to the gay community occurring at the national level, such as employing rhetoric comparing gay civil rights with Black civil rights.

The strategy of comparing the oppression of people of color (most commonly Black people) and the oppression of LGBT/queer people has been used by many white-dominated LGBT/queer organizations, including NGTF in its early years. The rationale has consistently been “to get these powerful men to take antigay discrimination as seriously as they supposedly took racial discrimination...[which] projected a set of comparisons...over whether sexual orientation was analogous to race, whether sexual desire and conduct were like, ‘skin color,’ or most specifically, whether being homosexual was like being African American”<sup>71</sup> since race is most often understood in the USA in terms of the black/white binary. Many activists understand that, as Allan Bérubé writes,

the parallel [between race and sexual orientation] is inexact...because ‘a person’s skin color is not the same as a person’s sexual identity; race is self-evident to many whereas sexual orientation is not. Moreover, the history of African Americans is not equivalent to the history of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in this country.’<sup>72</sup>

However, white-dominated organizations like NGLTF have only recently begun recognizing this, and white gay and lesbian activists have long put forth this analogy in an attempt to gain support for LGBT civil rights racially unmarked as white.

Recognizing that race and sexual orientation-based oppressions do not function in the

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<sup>71</sup> Bérubé, Allan. “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays.” from Rasmussen, Birgit Brander, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray, eds. *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. pp. 234-265. Page 239-240.

<sup>72</sup> Bérubé, Allan. “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays.” from Rasmussen, Birgit Brander, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray, eds. *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. pp. 234-265. Page 240.



same ways is important to people who actually want to fight both racism and homophobia/heterosexism, because they need to be addressed and acknowledged in different ways.

While NGLTF is now one of the most racially diverse national LGBT/queer advocacy organizations, it began as an entirely white organization and has maintained itself as predominantly white. Together, Bruce Voeller, Nathalie Rockhill, Ron Gold, Frank Kameny, Barbara Gittings, Martin Duberman, and Dr. Howard Brown founded NGTF. Of these activists, Voeller, Rockhill, and Gold had been “closely associated with the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), one of the premier post-Stonewall organizations,”<sup>73</sup> and reportedly become frustrated by the endless processing around decisions that took place within that group. D’Emilio states, “NGTF was founded specifically to free itself from the excessive democracy of local gay activist organizing, addressing national issues as a professional advocacy group.”<sup>74</sup> Brown was a recently publicly out gay man in 1973 and a former health commissioner for New York. Kameny had helped found the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles. He had been active in a great deal of activism often understood as alternately “accommodationist”<sup>75</sup> and groundbreaking. Which interpretation people take is dependent on if one looks at the strategy itself or what was new and challenging within the historical context. Gittings had founded the New York chapter of the

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<sup>73</sup> D’Emilio, John. “Organizational Tales: Interpreting the NGLTF Story.” *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. Page 104.

<sup>74</sup> D’Emilio, John. “Organizational Tales: Interpreting the NGLTF Story.” from D’Emilio, John, William B. Turner, and Urvashi Vaid, eds. *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy, and Civil Rights*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000, pp. 469-486. Page 480.

<sup>75</sup> D’Emilio, John. “Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy: The Gay and Lesbian Movement After 50 Years.” *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. Page 81.

Daughters of Bilitis and went on to do a great deal of work with Kameny and other gay civil rights-focused activists of the era.

From their employment, it is also easy to assume the founders of the National Gay Task Force were mostly middle or upper class. Former NGLTF board member and employee Urvashi Vaid wrote that Barbara Gittings, Nath Rockhill, and Ron Gold [were all] professionals; Howard Brown was a doctor, while Bruce Voeller and Frank Kameny were scientists.<sup>76</sup> This contributed to the professionalization of the gay rights or liberation movement which also occurred in the 1970s. During this period, professionals began to be involved with gay rights organizing and existing activists were increasingly expected to act as professionals or experts in gay rights work themselves. This period also marked a shift in the amount of attention and energies given to community-based groups versus legislative initiatives and court cases. Gay and lesbian people who already had white privilege and class privilege voiced sentiments about who should run the movement. A 1973 editorial in the national gay newsmagazine, *The Advocate*, posited it should be run by

“responsible, talented experts with widespread financial backing from all strata of the gay community”...[while also] mandat[ing] a politics of respectability that reflected a basic trust in the social and political status quo. It also excluded anyone who was not deemed acceptable by mainstream culture, and full citizenship became inextricably bound up with socioeconomic and even sexual respectability.<sup>77</sup>

Nonetheless (and possibly due in part to this perspective), “gay rights organizations played a very limited role in the lives of most gay men and lesbians. The groups remained small and were unable to garner much financial or organizational support

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<sup>76</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 268.

<sup>77</sup> Bronski, Michael. *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. Page 73-74.

from the community.”<sup>78</sup> Some of this was due to many lesbian, gay, or bisexual people being closeted or choosing to engage in activities or acknowledge same-sex desires without claiming gay, lesbian, or bisexual identities. However, even among the people who were “out,” many of them were simply unaware of the existence of political groups, as such groups were difficult to publicize. For people who were aware, no doubt some were simply uninterested in becoming involved or receiving additional information.

NGTF and the other national gay organizations which existed in the 1970s focused primarily on educating within the straight mainstream rather than intra-community work. Though some language and concepts were taken from gay liberation groups, NGTF chose to portray gay people as members of an oppressed minority seeking civil equality. NGTF did not try to present homosexuality as an alternative preferably to heterosexuality,<sup>79</sup> which was how the cultural segment of gay liberation tended to present gayness. Constructing a gay identity as comparable to a racial identity allowed possibilities for the validation of LGBT/queer identities because privileged people sometimes benevolently believe that oppressed people deserve some freedom from discrimination if the excuse for their oppression is an identity they cannot change because it is not “fair” to treat people differently if they did not “choose” to be different rather than because of a broader understanding of fairness and discrimination. It also allows greater opportunity to normalize lesbian and gay identities by portraying gay people as another oppressed minority group

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<sup>78</sup> Bronski, Michael. *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998. Page 74.

<sup>79</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 62.

rather than an intentional deviation from or radical alternative to heterosexuality encouraged and supported by other LGBT/queer people. However, this option has only really ever been available to white LGBT/queer people, since LGBT/queer people of color cannot put forth the same analogy; the contradiction and exclusion would be evident.

While NGTF was far more focused on obtaining a white-focused ideal of equal legal protection than on actively engaging with intersecting oppressions, it did make small strides towards including women and “Third World” people in its board and other work within its first decade of existing. The Board of Directors implemented gender parity in 1976 when it accepted the organizational by-laws, both for Board Co-Chairs and for Co-Directors. In 1979, the Board added a goal of having a minimum of twenty percent “third world representation”<sup>80</sup> (people of color) on the Board and on staff. An “Affirmative Action Resolution” for the Personnel Committee of the Board of Directors in 1981 presented:

Whereas women and third world persons have in the past been under-represented on the staff of NGTF, albeit unintentionally, and  
Whereas NGTF is committed to include and represent the views and interests of all segments of the gay and lesbian communities, and  
Whereas NGTF, as a civil rights organization, must be especially sensitive to groups which have been traditionally under-represented both in the larger community and in the gay community,  
Be it therefore resolved that the co-executive directors take every measure to achieve gender parity among staff—with respect to line levels, salaries and numbers—as rapidly as is consonant with efficient functioning of the organization and with fairness to its current employees, and to maintain this parity in the future;  
Be it further resolved that energetic and imaginative outreach to the lesbian and third world communities be initiated in pursuit of these goals, with sensitivity as well to older members of our community and

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<sup>80</sup> Draft for a Proposal: Affirmative Action Resolution. 27 May 1981 Box 1, Folder 20), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001).

to the physically challenged—not only by the co-executive directors and the office manager but also by the Personnel Committee and individual board members through their personal contacts<sup>81</sup>.

Although this resolution cites NGTF's responsibility to be "sensitive to groups which have been traditionally under-represented," how that "sensitivity" was to be proven was not explained. Furthermore, the similar civil rights struggles—namely, the civil rights struggles of women, African Americans, Asian Americans, Chicanos/as, and Native Americans—are portrayed as the reason for being sensitive to these groups's inclusion or representation, lest NGTF appear hypocritical by being overtly discriminatory. Yet NGTF seems to lack an understanding of how oppressions work and intersect as related systems. Despite this proclaimed need to be "sensitive," in reality NGTF failed to make an official commitment to supporting either "non-gay" civil rights issues or even issues which primarily affected LGBT people of color until at earliest the late 1980s. NGTF also put support behind other groups' issues when it served its own purposes and the existing mainstream lesbian and gay agenda, as with coalition work around hate crimes legislation which addressed both race and sexual orientation as protected categories.

Unfortunately, the goal of having at least twenty percent of the Board and staff be people of color was met less consistently than the goal of gender parity, which in practice meant representation by white women. Furthermore, representation or tokenization of marginalized people on NGTF's board of directors was not enough to ensure an equal or representative voice for NGTF from marginalized/oppressed

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<sup>81</sup> Draft for a Proposal: Affirmative Action Resolution. 27 May 1981 Box 1, Folder 20), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001).

communities. Historian and former NGLTF board member and long-time affiliate

John D’Emilio notes,

In the ’70s and into the ’80s I would say that more than any other kind of internal community issue, gender was on the table, much more than race or class for instance. And the Task Force actually had gotten further than many organizations had on this by the time that I became involved because they had built into what was called—not their constitution or whatever—their bylaws, built-in gender parity. However, at the board, there was gender parity at least when I came on the board in 1988, they had gender parity in terms of numbers. But there was not gender parity in terms of power, or maybe there was about to be gender parity in terms of power, and that’s why some of the old guys, not necessarily in terms of age, but were kind of Neanderthal and quite reactionary, I mean, that there was a real sort of resentment of women’s power and assertiveness in the organization.<sup>82</sup>

Similar sentiments opposing leadership by people of color were raised in the late 1980s, and were also presumably present before then (though these may have been kept more under wraps because of how few people of color were involved or in positions of power). From D’Emilio’s quotation, this is hardly surprising, given that even fifteen years after being founded women were represented but still not allowed the same amount of power or respect by men involved in the organization. Yet this disconnect between who was physically present and who held power is common, as “quotas increase representation but do nothing to expand understanding or effect the change needed to end racial intolerance and gender prejudice.”<sup>83</sup>

One instance of NGTF’s attempt to include people of color in the staff in the early 1980s is clouded from lack of available information in the archives and secondary sources. NGTF hired Mel Boozer, a Black gay man,

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<sup>82</sup> John D’Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

<sup>83</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 299.

as director of civil rights advocacy and the organizations Washington, D.C. office in 1981. Boozer had previously been president of the Gay Activists Alliance and was reportedly a “prominent and respected activist.”<sup>84</sup> However, in 1983, Boozer is reported to have resigned from NGTF under pressure to leave from new director Ginny Apuzzo, a white lesbian. While Apuzzo claimed to be surprised by the allegation that there was a racial motivator involved in Boozer’s resignation, she was vague in her comments:

“I have a new administration and I want to put a team together that I feel will be able to maximize the potential of certain program directions I have in mind... We will be working in much closer cooperation with organizations that Mel (Boozer) has not been able to establish a positive rapport with, and I don’t feel he’s in a position to maximize the success of the program.”<sup>85</sup>

Boozer’s replacement as NGTF lobbyist, Jeff Levi—a white gay man—acknowledged that, even without being able to divulge details about the situation, Boozer’s resignation letter “raise[d] issues that NGTF as an organization and the entire gay movement must deal with.” Additionally, regardless of the exact details of the situation, the resignation combined with existing knowledge of NGTF and other national LGBT/queer organizations so that the Washington, D.C. Black gay community wrote an open letter criticizing the dismissal. This letter said the dismissal was symbolic of “the insensitivity of the white gay power structure’ to the concerns of black gays...[and also] that is seemed symbolic: it appeared that a black gay person was being used as a token only to be discarded when his usefulness had

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<sup>84</sup> “NGTF reorganizes, moves to the left.” *The Body Politic*. October 1981 (Issue 77), pp. 18.-19. Page 18. Copyright EBSCO Publishing, 2003.

<sup>85</sup> “Black gays criticize Mel Boozer dismissal.” *The Body Politic*. April 1983 (Issue 92), pp. 19. Page 19. Copyright EBSCO Publishing, 2003.

ended.”<sup>86</sup> Tokenization is the practice of having a single person from a marginalized or minority community present to provide insight into their community. While this is often motivated with good intentions, people who are tokenized are simultaneously expected to be a representative of their community and not ever speak as an individual. They are also frequently ignored, overlooked, or dismissed when they voice opinions or perspectives with which others in the room or organization disagree.

NGTF’s board of directors also struggled to balance the amount of work that needed to be done with limited financial resources and commitment to a fair wage for staff. Board members have also encouraged the organization to avoid hypocritical employee policies, to relative success. For example, in 1985, a report to the Board noted NGTF was “seek[ing] to prevent others from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation when our personnel policies omit such provisions as maternity leave”<sup>87</sup> (emphasis in original). Board members also often called attention to gaps in programming, such as a lack of “programming directed toward the needs of lesbians, people of color, senior lesbians and gays, or those among us who are physically challenged”<sup>88</sup> in 1984. Even when the Board made no move to fill the gaps themselves, as in this example, with no “plans for the development of programming

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<sup>86</sup> “Black gays criticize Mel Boozer dismissal.” *The Body Politic*. April 1983 (Issue 92), pp. 19. Page 19. Copyright EBSCO Publishing, 2003.

<sup>87</sup> “The National Gay Task Force: The Challenge Ahead. A technical proposal for consideration by the Board of Directors.” 20 February 1985 Box 1, Folder 11), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001). Under “Staff Development,” page 7.

<sup>88</sup> “The National Gay Task Force: The Challenge Ahead. A technical proposal for consideration by the Board of Directors.” 20 February 1985 Box 1, Folder 11), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001). Under “Programs,” page 8-9.



addressing these areas of specific concern,”<sup>89</sup> simply noting the gaps allowed the staff and rest of the Board the opportunity to attempt it, or to “propose...the implementation of programming and the integration of such programming into the basic program of NGTF.”<sup>90</sup>

### **NGTF’s Early Issues and Actions**

John D’Emilio, historian and long-time NGLTF affiliate, believes that NGLTF’s organizational culture is one which seeks to fill whatever void exists within national LGBT/queer activism. He says that the organization has structured its programs and actions over the years as a result of this culture existing amongst both staff and board members.

Its purpose from its inception has been to do what needs to be done, but what no one else is doing. This sense of purpose propels it forward, creating a sense of daring, innovation, and living on the edge...Its periods of greatest achievement have come during those times when the void it chose to fill coincided with work that most needed doing and when the organization has been able to achieve consensus internally about what to do. But the imperative to innovate, to be on the edge, also has its drawbacks. It can lead to crisis and disarray as an organization tries to reinvent itself for the changing times. It prevents an organization from developing expertise and longevity in an area, as the work of one era comes to feel old and stale while the new always beckons alluringly.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> “The National Gay Task Force: The Challenge Ahead. A technical proposal for consideration by the Board of Directors.” 20 February 1985 Box 1, Folder 11), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001). Under “Programs,” page 8-9.

<sup>90</sup> “The National Gay Task Force: The Challenge Ahead. A technical proposal for consideration by the Board of Directors.” 20 February 1985 Box 1, Folder 11), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001). Under “Programs,” page 8-9.

<sup>91</sup> D’Emilio, John. “Organizational Tales: Interpreting the NGLTF Story.” from D’Emilio, John, William B. Turner, and Urvashi Vaid, eds. *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy, and Civil Rights*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000, pp. 469-486. Page 482.

Steve Endean, a founding member of NGTF's first board of directors, recalls witnessing "a natural, if regrettable, tendency to spend a disproportionate amount of time responding to crises rather than establishing a battle plan and sticking to it come hell or high water."<sup>92</sup> Endean also notes that was a very common experience for gay organizations of the era, whatever an organization's official goals and strategies were, and by no means something with which NGTF exclusively struggled. However, many groups—including NGTF—did not publicly acknowledge that this was happening. Furthermore, NGTF's initial goals were the broad directives to bring "gay liberation into the mainstream of American civil rights' and to 'focus on broad national issues."<sup>93</sup> Given this, it is not surprising that for the first decade of NGTF's existence, it focused on a wide variety of issues involving the federal government and influential national institutions as well as attempting to "serv[e] as a clearinghouse for information."<sup>94</sup>

The first major initiative NGTF tackled, in 1973, was advocating for the American Psychiatric Association to remove their classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder from their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. This was an issue various gay and lesbian activists had been working on for a number of years before NGTF was even founded. This allowed gay activists to assert that homosexuals were healthy and mentally well rather than sick or otherwise mentally deranged. It also served to legitimate the perspective as being "respectable" or "professional" because

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<sup>92</sup> Endean, Steve. *Bringing Lesbian and Gay Rights into the Mainstream: Twenty Years of Progress*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006. Page 39.

<sup>93</sup> Rimmerman, Craig A. "Beyond Political Mainstreaming: Reflections on National Lesbian and Gay Organizations and the Grassroots." *The Politics of Gay Rights*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. Page 62.

<sup>94</sup> Rimmerman, Craig A. "Beyond Political Mainstreaming: Reflections on National Lesbian and Gay Organizations and the Grassroots." *The Politics of Gay Rights*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. Page 62.

the psychiatric profession catered most successfully to white, middle and upper class educated people who had reason to respect or the means to use psychiatric services. NGTF is not documented as having addressed how psychiatric diagnoses have also often been used to institutionalize minority and/or marginalize populations without consent. NGTF has also taken the credit for successfully changing the APA's standards within their first year of functioning without recognition of the work that preceded them, some done by NGTF founders and some by non-NGTF affiliated activists.

By 1975 NGTF claimed a number of successes. It had helped remove the federal government's ban of gays and lesbians working in federal jobs. It had worked with the American Bar Association and the National Council of Churches to get them to support sodomy law repeal and condemn anti-gay discrimination, respectively. And it had worked with then-Representative Bella Abzug on the introduction of the first gay rights bill to Congress (HR5452). NGTF also worked with the Democratic National Convention around having gay and lesbian delegates and helped found AIDS Action and the NORA (National Organizations Responding to AIDS) coalition in response to the AIDS epidemic. It conducted a survey of major corporations about anti-gay discrimination, such as hiring, firing, and harassment practices, in the workplace, as well as establishing the first national hotline for victims of anti-gay violence. NGTF's work with the federal government touched the U.S. Civil Service Commission, the U.S. Congress, the Internal Revenue Service, President Carter's International Women's Year Commission, the U.S. Public Health Service, the Centers for Disease Control, and the Justice Department. It focused on allowing gay and

lesbian people to work for the federal government, the visibility of gays and lesbians, and lifting homosexuality as a reason for being denied a security clearance to come into the country.<sup>95</sup> Again, all of these were important initiatives to tackle in the struggle to obtain equal rights for gays and lesbians on the national level, but nonetheless continued to privilege the white, middle and upper class sections of the LGBT/queer community because of who was allowed to be visible as community representatives. More significant than questions just about representation, these sections of the LGBT/queer community were privileged because of how and why certain issues were being prioritized by LGBT/queer organizations. Setting the foundation for contemporary strategies, the gay men and lesbians visible to and emphasized by organizations like NGTF fit into the strategy Bérubé calls “selling gay whiteness.”

The marketing of gays as white and wealthy to make money and increase political capital, either to raise funds for campaigns (in both progay and antigay benefits, advertising, and direct-mail appeals) or to gain economic power (by promoting or appealing to a gay consumer market).<sup>96</sup>

The focus was on maintaining employment and benefits, maintaining respectability and normalcy, and encouraging participation in the U.S. political process without a visible analysis of the inherent problems of the U.S. political process.

At this time, NGTF also attempted to join the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), which then included over 120 member organizations. It first attempted this under the direction of Bruce Voeller and was not accepted for

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<sup>95</sup> “Task Force History.” *National Gay and Lesbian Task Force*. <<http://thetaskforce.org/aboutus/history.cfm#1980>> Accessed 7 October 2007.

<sup>96</sup> Bérubé, Allan. “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays.” from Rasmussen, Birgit Brander, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray, eds. *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. pp. 234-265. Page 238.

unspecified reasons. Long-time moderate gay activist Steven Endean notes that while NGTF was the largest national gay rights group of the time, that their “broad agenda for gay freedom posed a challenge for those that might accept civil rights but not endorsement of the lifestyle,”<sup>97</sup> even though NGTF’s actions spoke almost exclusively to civil rights and respectability rather than gay issues as a lifestyle. They were finally admitted in conjunction with the National Gay Rights Lobby between 1981 and 1983<sup>98</sup> after current LCCR members were convinced that this did not mean that every national gay organizations would subsequently insist on membership.<sup>99</sup> This membership “helped establish the gay civil rights movement as a ‘player’ within the broader civil rights community, providing tremendous opportunities for invaluable networking with other progressive groups and lobbyists.”<sup>100</sup> However, even this move was very strategic in terms of gaining respectability for the gay rights struggle from other civil rights organizations, and not focused on supporting other civil rights struggles as integral to the gay rights agenda.

NGTF struggled with how to engage with the 1979 March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, which included civil rights and legislative recognition in its goals while also endorsing a much broader liberation agenda. The planners of the 1979 March, of whom “over half . . . were women, and 30 percent were Third World

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<sup>97</sup> Endean, Steve. *Bringing Lesbian and Gay Rights into the Mainstream: Twenty Years of Progress*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006. Page 61.

<sup>98</sup> The year is uncertain because the only mention I found for this was in: Endean, Steve. *Bringing Lesbian and Gay Rights into the Mainstream: Twenty Years of Progress*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006. Page 66-68. However, he neglects to say the year NGTF was admitted to the LCCR, only saying that then NGTF employee Mel Boozer was involved in the final process. Mel Boozer was only employed by NGTF from the spring of 1981 to the spring of 1983.

<sup>99</sup> Endean, Steve. *Bringing Lesbian and Gay Rights into the Mainstream: Twenty Years of Progress*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006. Page 68.

<sup>100</sup> Endean, Steve. *Bringing Lesbian and Gay Rights into the Mainstream: Twenty Years of Progress*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006. Page 68.

people,”<sup>101</sup> constituted a markedly different demographic than comprised NGTF’s leadership of the time. The organizers, of whom many were lesbians and gay radicals, devoted significant amounts of unpaid labor to coordinating this demonstration. Their organizing practices were much more of a challenge to the pervasive sexism and racism, and budding professional elitism within the gay and lesbian movement of the time than NGTF’s board of directors and other recognized movement leaders. While this made fundraising for the march more difficult because it tended to appeal less to rich LGBT people who tended to have more moderate or conservative politics, it also helped people who were not trying to build “careers as ‘gay insiders’... gain leadership skills and experience.”<sup>102</sup> While this was a positive move, the fact that it was not spearheaded or in any way directed by “professional” (paid) LGBT activists in some ways undercut the burgeoning authority and expertise of the paid staffers. Additionally, the march organizers included in their demands a call for legislative reforms, but were also far more willing to engage with a broad range of people and perspectives than NGTF’s board, which therefore threatened NGTF and other national gay organizations’ commitment to working solely on reforms.

As a result, NGTF came close to not endorsing the march at all. In 1981, long-time gay activist Scott Tucker wrote in the progressive gay weekly newspaper *Gay Community News*,

The December 1980 issue of *It’s Time*, NGTF’s newsletter, carried a front-page photograph of the NGTF banner at the March on Washington. For some

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<sup>101</sup> Tucker, Scott. “The Counterrevolution.” from Tucker, Scott. *The Queer Question: Essays on Desire and Democracy*. Boston: South End Press, 1997, pp. 3 -9. First published in *Gay Community News*, 21 February 1981. Page 6.

<sup>102</sup> Tucker, Scott. “The Counterrevolution.” from Tucker, Scott. *The Queer Question: Essays on Desire and Democracy*. Boston: South End Press, 1997, pp. 3 -9. First published in *Gay Community News*, 21 February 1981. Page 5-6.

of us who still remain members of NGTF, that banner lost its glory when the NGTF board of directors failed to endorse the march until the eleventh hour. Their opportunism was a disgrace *then*, and remains a danger to our movement *now*... What we need is independent political action based on militant, grassroots organizing, and this is just what NGTF and the Gay Rights National Lobby can't build or provide."<sup>103</sup>

Because the 1979 March on Washington adhered to more progressive politics and organizing strategies than either NGTF or NGRL, these two fairly mainstream/assimilationist organizations hesitated to endorse it. Because the underlying goals of the march were in line with NGTF and NGRL's long term goals, the difference in strategy and commitment to multi-issue organizing was something of which NGTF and NGRL were not entirely supportive. So while NGTF did end up endorsing the 1979 March on Washington, it waited until the last minute despite having much advance notice of the march. That in and of itself was not surprising to many progressive activists of the time. Yet given how well the march was received by the LGBT/queer community, NGTF then marketed its endorsement of the march to gain both new members and new support from existing members as if they had been supportive of the march the entire time.

Because of its work on the national level when it was the only organization working on gay issues in such a broad way, NGTF quickly became well-known within the somewhat connected gay and lesbian activist community. Gay politics in the 1970s were still very much about liberation rather than attempting to moderate institutionalized heterosexism through such traditional means as electoral politics.

Thus some people questioned why NGTF was working on the federal/national level at

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<sup>103</sup> Tucker, Scott. "The Counterrevolution." from Tucker, Scott. *The Queer Question: Essays on Desire and Democracy*. Boston: South End Press, 1997, pp. 3 -9. First published in *Gay Community News*, 21 February 1981. Page 6-7.

all. Others questioned whether focusing that high up could possibly be successful for deeply felt change, a concern more generally held about the use of working with law. Urvasi Vaid describes the difference between gay rights, which is what NGTF was seeking, and gay liberation, or what many of NGTF's critics were seeking:

Unlike gay rights, gay liberation stands for a broader set of cultural values—like political freedom for all, social justice, and the rebuilding of human community among gay, straight, and bisexual people of all colors, religions, and ethnicities. It also challenges us to articulate new codes of ethics, morality, and individual responsibility. The paradigm shift liberation requires is from the political to the cultural.<sup>104</sup>

Liberation has generally been understood to encompass much broader social acceptance and support than does a focus on gaining exclusively and only civil rights, which do not extend before enforced tolerance. It also necessarily relates to sexual freedom around the possibility of articulating new ethical and moral standards. John D'Emilio, a long-time gay activist, is clear that *especially* at the time that gay liberation groups were still visible, such mainstream organizations like NGTF was never one of them.

From my perspective as a local activist in '73 and '74 the Task Force was repulsive because it represented one more stage in the further conservatizing [sic] of the movement. You know, retrospectively I might think that, but I can also say that you know, we needed national organizations at that point because there was a whole arena of policy and institutions that wasn't being touched by our local activism, and it was unlikely that radicals were going to create a national organization that tried to deal with federal issues. So I am really glad they formed it.<sup>105</sup>

Vaid adds, "By pursuing the path of civil rights [from the 1970s to the present], we consciously chose legal reform, political access, visibility, and legitimation over the

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<sup>104</sup> Vaid, Urvasi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996. Page 180.

<sup>105</sup> John D'Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.



long-term goals of cultural acceptance, social transformation, understanding, and liberation.”<sup>106</sup>

Not everyone thought that reforms or revolution were an absolutely, mutually exclusive strategic choices. However, organizations like NGTF which were focused on achieving reforms tended to be scared of how fighting for liberation might mean no forward progress because it was seen as “too radical” by legislators and people in power. Long-time gay activist Scott Tucker wrote in a 1981 editorial for the progressive gay weekly newspaper *Gay Community News*,

In a time of reaction, reformism fails to deliver, and even such reforms as have been won are under attack. Demands for the liberation of women, Third World people, gay people, children, workers, and others—these are essentially *revolutionary* demands which overflow reformist barriers. Reformism may serve certain elites and bureaucracies very well, but these people are riding the crest of social movements they did not create, and they must not be allowed to hold the rest of us back.<sup>107</sup>

Many activists, Tucker included, also saw that the issues groups like NGTF were afraid to address in the 1970s, including “sexual freedom and youth liberation,”<sup>108</sup> were important to engage with both for the larger society and because it was precisely those subjects that the conservative right seized upon repeatedly in drumming up anti-gay sentiments. NGTF also failed to acknowledge for decades that some of their success probably derived from their being perceived as “reasonable,” which could only happen with more progressive and radical gay liberation groups making greater demands and using less mainstream tactics to serve as a point of comparison.

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<sup>106</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996. Page 107.

<sup>107</sup> Tucker, Scott. “The Counterrevolution.” from Tucker, Scott. *The Queer Question: Essays on Desire and Democracy*. Boston: South End Press, 1997, pp. 3 -9. First published in *Gay Community News*, 21 February 1981. Page 9.

<sup>108</sup> Tucker, Scott. “Too Queer to Be Gay? A populist group fails to support sexual minorities.” from Tucker, Scott. *The Queer Question: Essays on Desire and Democracy*. Boston: South End Press, 1997, pp. 10-15. First published in *New York Native*, 1-14 June 1981. Page 14.

Many gay activists were aware that the right to privacy could easily become “enforced secrecy,”<sup>109</sup> particularly for those with the privilege to afford private property or access to private property. This was another objection to some of NGTF’s work and rhetoric. Tucker recalls that Charles Brydon gave a speech in his last year as co-director of the National Gay Task Force in 1979 to a gathering of gay professionals in which he emphasized that a key strategy in immediate future needed to be the pursuit of the right to privacy. Tucker reports Brydon as having “stressed that conservatives are great partisans of this right [without acknowledging]... all sectors of the right are free to interpret [queer people’s] right to privacy as being [the] right to the closet.”<sup>110</sup> After all, if people are only thought to deserve the right to engage in sexual acts specifically because such acts take place in the privacy of their own home, that right hinges on the location. Assumedly, then, people should have no need to bring sexual issues up outside of that private location. Furthermore, if gay people are defined by the sexual acts in which they engage (or even just the partners for such acts), that too should remain private information. Tucker does not address how working class and poor people have less chance of accumulating private property in which they might express their sexual identities or behaviors under such a privacy perspective of gay equal rights, or how people of color are more likely to be lower class and are consequently generally more heavily policed as possessing racially and class-marked bodies. This sort of rhetoric around rights dependent on existing

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<sup>109</sup> Tucker, Scott. “Our Right to the World.” from Tucker, Scott. *The Queer Question: Essays on Desire and Democracy*. Boston: South End Press, 1997, pp. 25-37. First published in *The Body Politic*, July/August 1982. Page 31.

<sup>110</sup> Tucker, Scott. “Our Right to the World.” from Tucker, Scott. *The Queer Question: Essays on Desire and Democracy*. Boston: South End Press, 1997, pp. 25-37. First published in *The Body Politic*, July/August 1982. Page 31.

property rights also feeds into a white dominated, middle and upper class mainstream LGBT agenda, and how NGTF helped shape that agenda.

## **Conclusion**

NGLTF is widely recognized as having a significant influence on what is considered the national lesbian and gay agenda since it was founded in 1973 as one of the first two national gay advocacy organizations. In its focus on obtaining equality by employing a civil rights discourse, it created a space for lesbian and gay activists to work on specific projects that were more explicitly goal and action oriented, and less process oriented, than what locally-based gay liberation groups of the era were working on.

NGLTF's social and historical context and the backgrounds of the people who founded it contributed to the fact that the issues NGLTF chose to focus on in the 1970s were those which first and foremost benefited white, middle and upper class gay men. Not surprisingly, given which identities are consistently privileged in the U.S. society, these subjects have continued to be the primary beneficiaries of the national lesbian and gay political agenda from the 1970s into the 1990s and even now. Even though NGTF attempted to address representation of white women and queer people of color on its board of directors, those people's voices were not consistently present, and were often not afforded the same space or weight when they were present. The mostly white and assumedly predominantly middle to upper class board of directors therefore chose actions which appeared to be important to them, from working with the American Psychiatric Association to engaging with the

executive branch of the federal government. At the same time, they shied away from working on a more grassroots level or even endorsing less reform-centered actions and demands from other organizations except when it seemed to their benefit. Examples of this include when they loudly celebrated their endorsement of the 1979 March on Washington after it was a success after coming close to not endorsing it at all and their desire to be admitted into the Leadership Council on Civil Rights.

In the next chapter, I will address how this emphasis on whiteness also influenced how NGLTF addressed questions of sexual practices, where I examine the organizational choices to maintain the representative image of the LGBT/queer community as white and privileged under the assumption that that would be most successful in gaining support from relatively conservative legislators on pro-gay policies and legislation. Had the organization conceived of success in a way that relied less on building alliances from very privileged people in positions of power and more on building a broad-based grassroots-level movement (even potentially focused on still affecting the few privileged people in positions of power), they may have chosen different strategies or reconsidered what image they wanted to consistently put forth.

## Chapter Two

### Strategically Adding Sex to Civil Rights

The Task Force was never an organization that was primarily about sexual liberation. Never in any incarnation. It was an organization that for a long period in its history... could primarily be considered about civil rights, equal rights, based on sexual orientation, and sexual liberation sort of surfaced.<sup>111</sup>

As a historian and longtime activist who has worked with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) since the 1980s, John D'Emilio's assessment of the Task Force is that it was always a civil rights organizations that interacted with sexual liberation politics briefly because of the historical context in which it emerged. He is clear that even then, though, NGLTF maintained its mainstream position and tactics. Yet at the Sex and Politics forum held for the lesbian and gay community in Washington, D.C. in November 1989 Sue Hyde was reported as declaring, "If I can't fuck, this isn't my revolution."<sup>112</sup> She is also recorded as having regularly made sexualized comments at other Sex and Politics town hall meetings. While this may not seem contradictory, the fact that NGLTF was so mainstream, and that she was saying such things as a representative of the organization is surprising. After all, such remarks are hardly what one expects to hear from the director of an anti-sodomy law repeal initiative called, "Privacy Project," which was Hyde's staff position at the time. This demonstrates the different language and perspective that NGLTF staff took on depending on if they were talking to queer audiences or to predominantly straight legislators and others in power.

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<sup>111</sup> John D'Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

<sup>112</sup> Photocopy of Dave Walter's article "Sex," from *The Advocate*. 3 January 1989 (Box 12, Folder 18), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.

NGLTF has indeed always been an organization focused on obtaining equal civil rights for the lesbian and gay community, a goal not usually associated with frank discussions of human sexuality or how to publicly address same-sex desire. However, particularly within the mid and late 1980s, the broader U.S. political and social context was such that individual NGLTF staff members were able to incorporate some of their personal commitments to the ideals of sexual liberation—including the freedom to engage in whatever types of sex people wished to have with whomever fully consented without facing judgment or criminal or social consequence—into their programmatic work, as well as to engage regularly with lesbian and gay audiences through pointed rhetoric of sexual freedom that included graphic, sexual language. Indeed, in the Privacy Project-sponsored Town Hall Meetings on Sex and Politics and in the work lobbyist Peri Jude Radecic did to protect National Endowment for the Arts funding both engaged fairly openly with sexual liberation politics in a way that was markedly different than the tactics of many other national lesbian and gay advocacy organizations, which have often been more apt to shy away from directly dealing with sex.

Most of the lesbian and gay community believed that if gay people were to be widely accepted in society, sexual behaviors assumed to be done primarily by lesbian and gay people, like sodomy (most commonly used as a gloss for anal sex) and fellatio/cunnilingus (oral sex), would need to be decriminalized and to some degree accepted. Therefore, NGLTF staff believed that obtaining gay civil rights would then necessitate incorporating some gains for sexual freedom, and the broader lesbian and gay community rarely criticized or questioned this position. Yet because of who was

made visible as spokespersons to white upper class male legislators, and because of the history of racism that has stereotyped many groups of color as hypersexualized (especially Black men and women), most public representations of gay and lesbian political cause were white and were therefore able to focus exclusively on questions of sexual orientation and identity without regard to race. This left both their own whiteness and the whiteness of their political work unmarked racially. So while seemingly progressive because of dealing with the very taboo subject of same-sex desire and homosexuality, early lesbian and gay organizations served to shape and maintain the white dominated, middle and upper class, mainstream gay agenda which was and remains predominant within the USA. Specifically within NGLTF, this agenda has been maintained because each action around a progressive, multi-issue concern has been directed by staff members, rather than originating from directives made by the board of directors or executive director (or even coming from multiple staff working together intentionally). As a result, and as this chapter demonstrates, while NGLTF was forced to explicitly address sexual behavior while addressing anti-sodomy laws and the AIDS epidemic, it nonetheless maintained a mainstream civil rights focus, only allowing individual staff members to initiate some connections to sexual liberation rhetoric within the more “in house” and safer realm of queer community work.

I first provide an overview of the social and historical context of sexual liberation in the 1980s. I will then examine NGLTF’s programmatic choices relating to sexual freedom in three key cases: 1) the Privacy Project; 2) NGLTF’s response to the AIDS crisis; and 3) lobbying work around National Endowment for the Arts

(NEA) funding cuts in response to Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial photography exhibitions. The Privacy Project and NGLTF's AIDS advocacy work were major parts of NGLTF's work in the late 1980s, yet the clear connections made between these initiatives and sexual freedom, and the work NGLTF did with the queer BDSM community in response to the NEA funding crisis, were all clearly initiated by individual staff members. I focus on these three because they are also the best, and among the only, instances that demonstrate a commitment or recognized connection to sexual liberation politics through the NGLTF archives and published sources. Moreover, they were mentioned in the interviews with leaders within NGLTF. I also examine the rhetoric used by NGLTF staff first within the organization and within lesbian and gay community spaces and how it differs from the rhetoric and strategies used with legislators. I conclude by analyzing how this commitment to engaging with sexual liberation rhetoric has been defended as a necessity given the historical context of anti-sodomy laws and the AIDS epidemic, and how this limited posture then feeds into and reinforces the contemporary national white dominated, middle and upper class mainstream lesbian and gay agenda.

### **Socio-Political Context for Addressing Gay Communities and Sex in the 1980s**

Throughout the 1980s, the ways in which both the AIDS epidemic and anti-sodomy laws were used to block anti-discrimination legislation for the lesbian and gay community in the USA greatly affected the politics of lesbian and gay sexual liberation. Scholar Margaret Cruikshank notes,

By now the view that lesbian and gay sex is just sex might have become widely accepted if the AIDS epidemic had not appeared in the second decade



of gay liberation. AIDS and HIV created a fear that gay sex is not only bad but equals death, a fear exacerbated by media treatment of the disease. People with AIDS have been stereotyped as promiscuous and treated like lepers. The association of gay sex with fatal illness had an extremely negative effect on gay liberation as a sexual freedom movement.<sup>113</sup>

Existing anti-sodomy laws were also important, as the 1986 Supreme Court ruling in *Bowers v. Hardwick* reaffirmed states' rights to have such laws. Sodomy laws are any of a variety of laws that criminalize private, consensual behavior between adults that do not lead directly to procreation—most frequently, oral and anal sex. These laws had existed and been selectively enforced against same-sex sexual partners in some states in the U.S. as late as 2003, when *Lawrence v. Texas* overturned the ruling in *Bowers v. Hardwick*. Each state's laws differ; some only criminalized sodomy between same-sex partners, others technically criminalized it for anyone although male-female couples were rarely caught or prosecuted. States also varied in how explicit the laws were as to what was considered punishable. For example, Missouri outlawed digital penetration. Furthermore, the issues of AIDS and anti-sodomy laws became entangled with one another at times when anti-sodomy bills were introduced as an alleged prevention strategy for AIDS.

The US Supreme Court required the lesbian and gay movement to reconsider its strategy when it upheld the constitutionality of existing anti-sodomy laws in *Bowers v. Hardwick*. The majority opinion stated: "private sexual activity between consenting adults is not protected by the Constitution even in a person's own

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<sup>113</sup> Cruikshank, Margaret. *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Page 37-38.

bedroom.”<sup>114</sup> The ruling “implicitly upheld any law that criminalizes any of the sexual practices of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people.”<sup>115</sup>

At the same time the Court refused to rule on the constitutionality of laws that apply to *heterosexual* sodomy; presumably, however, heterosexual conduct would have been protected from state sanction because of the earlier reproductive rights decisions that had found and upheld a fundamental right to engage in non-procreative heterosexual sex.<sup>116</sup>

The court’s ruling negatively affected gay and lesbian civil rights work because anti-sodomy statutes were frequently cited by people opposing non-discrimination legislation that would protect people regardless of sexual orientation. “Sodomy laws can also make lesbians, bisexuals and gay men ineligible for public employment in many states, because of the presumption that those who apparently regularly engage in illegal sexual acts are ineligible for public employment.”<sup>117</sup> While anti-sodomy laws had already been a challenge, the Supreme Court’s affirmation that state governments had the right to criminalize consensual behavior between adults in a private sphere provided additional support to people opposed to civil rights for lesbian and gay people. As a result, activists began to shift away “from challenging the criminalization of homosexual ‘conduct,’ specifically homosexual ‘sodomy’, to challenging discrimination against people on the basis of a homosexual ‘identity.’”<sup>118</sup>

This shift in focusing on challenging discrimination against people with real or

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<sup>114</sup> Cruikshank, Margaret. *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Page 53.

<sup>115</sup> Currah, Paisley. “Searching for Immutability: Homosexuality, Race and Rights Discourse.” from Wilson, Angelia R., ed. *A Simple Matter of Justice? Theorizing Lesbian and Gay Politics*. New York: Cassell, 1995, pp. 51-90. Page 52.

<sup>116</sup> Currah, Paisley. “Searching for Immutability: Homosexuality, Race and Rights Discourse.” from Wilson, Angelia R., ed. *A Simple Matter of Justice? Theorizing Lesbian and Gay Politics*. New York: Cassell, 1995, pp. 51-90. Page 52-53.

<sup>117</sup> Currah, Paisley. “Searching for Immutability: Homosexuality, Race and Rights Discourse.” from Wilson, Angelia R., ed. *A Simple Matter of Justice? Theorizing Lesbian and Gay Politics*. New York: Cassell, 1995, pp. 51-90. Page 53.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

perceived homosexual identities rather than against people who were caught engaging in “deviant” sex acts with members of the same sex was one that NGLTF had already been playing into with its emphasis on obtaining gay civil rights, to which the ruling in *Bowers v. Hardwick* lent additional support.

Police also often used anti-sodomy laws to justify solicitation and loitering laws frequently used to entrap men “cruising,” or seeking sexual encounters, in public spaces.<sup>119</sup> These laws disproportionately penalized “men who have sex with men.”<sup>120</sup> They also have disproportionately targeted people of color and/or lower or working class men, both because public spaces face increased police scrutiny and because of how the criminal justice system regularly delivered more severe punishments to men of color and lower/working class men accused of breaking the law.

In US society, white and male dominated police forces have traditionally focused attention on people whose bodies are racially and class marked than people whose bodies perceived as “normal,” due to their whiteness and middle or upper class status. Often privileged police officers assume that people of color (generally assumed to be lower class based on race) and lower class white people are more likely to be engaged in criminal activity. This is either because such people stand out when they are somewhere police do not expect to see them (namely, white, middle and/or upper class communities) or because crime rates tend to be higher in

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<sup>119</sup> Currah, Paisley. “Searching for Immutability: Homosexuality, Race and Rights Discourse.” from Wilson, Angelia R., ed. *A Simple Matter of Justice? Theorizing Lesbian and Gay Politics*. New York: Cassell, 1995, pp. 51-90. Page 53.

<sup>120</sup> In public health programs, this population is commonly referred to as “MSMs.” It includes male-assigned people who engage in sexual acts with other male-assigned people, including men who identify as gay, straight, bisexual, or do not label their sexual orientation. It also includes transgender women (especially pre-operative or non-operative) because of assumed risk related to anatomy and behaviors, and seems applicable to include here because of how police often assume transwomen are actually men.

communities of color and poor people due to a combination of higher prosecution rates and limited economic opportunities.

The policing of male cruising has disproportionately targeted lower class people due to the class-based nature of access to private space. Because access to private spaces where people have sex, whether that is in houses or apartments, private clubs or bathhouses, is often limited by one's financial resources and class status, lower class men have often used public spaces, like bathrooms, parks, and rest stops, to have sex because they offer spaces that offer the semi-privacy of shrubbery, divided stalls, et cetera. "Men who have sex with men" regardless of socio-economic class may use semi-private settings because they offer relative anonymity for sexual encounters. Yet even that is classed in terms of whether people use those spaces because they are the only ones they can access for anonymous sex or if they are being used as one option available (other options for anonymous or confidential sex include bathhouses and sex workers in private homes or rented rooms), and in the case of sex work, who is prosecuted for the crimes of prostitution or solicitation. Yet because they are not privately-owned, law enforcement and courts have not considered them private enough for sexual activities, and have full rights to police them without warrants. Similarly, class can effect how sex in semi-private space is understood by law enforcement. Lower class people engaging in semi-private sex are also often targeted by police because they are often assumed to be engaging in sex work as a survival strategy (which may or may not be true), and because policing of sex work focuses on the sex worker rather than on the customer (more likely to be any specific class).

The AIDS epidemic added to the urgent need to combat anti-sodomy laws because of how such laws were repeatedly used in attempts to prevent the spread of AIDS or as reason to withhold necessarily explicit educational prevention materials. They were seen as a possible public health measure to curtail the spread of HIV because unprotected anal sex is a high risk activity for the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.<sup>121</sup> However, no thought was given to the different definitions of sodomy and use of appropriate safer sex materials, or to differentiating between protected/safer anal sex and unprotected anal sex. For example, New Hampshire proposed reinstating their anti-sodomy law as an AIDS prevention strategy, while in Texas people organized against repealing the anti-sodomy law on the basis that it would “run counter to stemming the AIDS epidemic.”<sup>122</sup> Conversely, anti-sodomy laws were also used as rationales for why public health programs and organizations were not allowed to produce safer sex education materials that addressed criminalized behaviors, thus muffling a likely more effective prevention strategy.

Gay and lesbian advocacy groups began addressing the AIDS epidemic because of the high numbers of gay men who were noticeably infected. However, even though most gay and lesbian advocacy organizations were not dedicated to sexual liberation politics, they were challenged with how to address AIDS in a way that did not play into the vilification or blaming of gay men. Within the gay and

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<sup>121</sup> See Dangerous Bedfellows, ed. *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1996, particularly Allan Bérubé’s “The History of Gay Bathhouses” (p. 187-220) and Priscilla Alexander’s “Bathhouses and Brothels: Symbolic Sites in Discourse and Practice” (p. 221-249).

<sup>122</sup> Sue Hyde, interview by author, digital recording in person, 27 July 2005.

lesbian community, no consensus has ever been reached as for how to respond to AIDS and gay male sex.

AIDS struck at the heart of the value of sexual freedom that many gay men believed constituted gay liberation. It became harder to explain to an increasingly conservative country, which believed gay men were dying because they had too much sex, why gay sexual freedom was important. The mainstream gay and AIDS movements devised a complex response distancing itself from the sexual liberation ethic of the seventies, while at the same time developing new ways to talk about sexual practices and transmission (media ads, safer sex workshops, videos, posters, and countless other campaigns). In the first instance, we quickly revised our community's sexual history to point out and play up those in committed relationships, and cited the dramatic decline in rates of new infection among gay men as a sign of gay men's sexual responsibility. AIDS education and prevention instituted what Gabriel Rotello has termed 'the code of the condom'—reflected in the message that a condom used properly, every time, for anal sex would prevent the transmission of HIV. In either instance, because of our fear of homophobia, we responded to the cultural visibility that AIDS gave to gay male sexual life with a politically motivated effort to de-emphasize the importance of sexuality in the lives of gay men.<sup>123</sup>

NGLTF was one of the organizations that took this tactic of deemphasizing the role of sex in lesbian and gay people's lives. This was primarily done by creating a division between when advocacy focused on the behaviors people were engaging in rather than identities (usually around public health funding) and when advocacy focused on committed relationships between gay people (with identity emphasized alongside respectable behavior) were mobilized. Focusing on love and committed relationship when talking about gay and lesbian identified people was assumed to be a more sympathetic goal that a wider range of people would support, while sexual behaviors unassociated with any one sexual orientation were more effective in public health advocacy. Thus, recognition that committed relationships could involve taboo sexual

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<sup>123</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996. Page 85.

behaviors also fell to the wayside in this sanitized discourse, with love being held markedly distinct from and different than sex.

The AIDS epidemic has had a huge impact on lesbian and gay organizing strategies and on who made up the movement. White, middle and upper class gay men sought out the lesbian and gay movement in response to the AIDS epidemic in unprecedented numbers, which served to bring new energy and greater numbers while also bringing the perspective of people who oftentimes lacked knowledge about how lesbian and gay activism had been done for decades and how the lesbian and gay rights or gay liberation movement had interacted with other social movements. Less attention has been paid historically to how men of color responded to the AIDS epidemic. AIDS also killed many gay men who were visible community leaders, and innumerable others who might have taken on leadership roles. Negative sentiments directed against people with or assumed to have AIDS demonstrated the “continuing strength of gay oppression... [by demonstrating] that only a deeply rooted, systemic homophobia could explain the callous, even murderous, neglect by the government and the mass media of an epidemic that was killing them and their loved ones”<sup>124</sup>. Frequently men with visible signs associated with having AIDS, like Kaposi’s sarcoma (a manifestation of a strand of Human Herpes Virus that includes visible lesions and has heavily affected people with AIDS), were assumed to be gay and thus faced both anti-AIDS and anti-gay discrimination. This new experience with discrimination, particularly for white, middle/upper class, previously closeted (or selectively “out”) gay men, spurred many of these men with no prior involvement

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<sup>124</sup> D’Emilio, John. “After Stonewall” from D’Emilio, John. *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*. New York: Routledge, 1992. pp. 234-274. Page 262-263.

with lesbian and gay political struggles to bring their energy and support to lesbian and gay advocacy organizations.

The inability of many existing health service organizations to respond respectfully and responsibly to the AIDS epidemic also created unique opportunities and a pressing need for lesbian and gay people of color to create and lead their own organizations, since higher rates of infection were being documented in both their mixed race lesbian and gay and predominantly straight Black and Latino/a communities.<sup>125</sup> This epidemic also meant that a feminist analysis<sup>126</sup> of health issues finally became widely accepted and applied, thus opening the door for other feminist analyses to be heard in a new light.<sup>127</sup> Interestingly, the lesbian feminist sex wars<sup>128</sup> also coincided with discussions about what constituted acceptable gay male sexual behavior during the AIDS epidemic. Finally, John D’Emilio notes,

When gays had approached these institutions for a cause that smacked of sexual freedom, it was relatively easy to turn the other way. When these same activists arrived wearing the hat of AIDS service provider or educator and

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<sup>125</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996. Page 89-90.

<sup>126</sup> “As a consequence of the epidemic, the feminist health agenda became the health agenda of the gay and lesbian movement. This meant that organizations like NGLTF and Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund began to explore issues they had never before concentrated on, like health insurance reform, welfare reform, eligibility for Social Security Disability income, Medicaid eligibility, access to affordable and quality health care, sex education, and nondiscrimination in health care delivery. But this absorption of this health agenda did not answer the more radical feminist criticism. The feminist movement analyzed the health care system as a politicized arena in which homophobia, sexism, racism, and economic disparity were institutionalized. The feminist mission was the construction of a more just, accessible, and fair health care system, guided by and empowering the people it served” Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996. Page 87.

<sup>127</sup> D’Emilio, John. “After Stonewall” from D’Emilio, John. *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*. New York: Routledge, 1992. pp. 234-274. Page 263-264.

<sup>128</sup> The GLBTQ Encyclopedia has an entry on the “Lesbian Sex Wars” written by Elise Chenier which describes the sex wars as “one of the most significant debates among second-wave feminists in the United States, Canada, Britain, and elsewhere. Lasting roughly from 1980 to 1990, it is often characterized as a battle between “pro-sex” and “anti-sex” forces, but arguments over how to address problems of sexual violence and oppression, while at the same time giving consideration to female sexual pleasure and autonomy, were much more complex than such labels.” From <[http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/lesbian\\_sex\\_wars.html](http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/lesbian_sex_wars.html)> Accessed 19 January 2007.



addressing a menace to the public health of the nation, at least some doors opened. And doors that opened because of AIDS remained access points for dealing later on with a range of other lesbian and gay issues. The relationships that formed, the bonds of respect that were forged, and the knowledge of how institutions worked and how decisions were made became valuable resources for the gay community.<sup>129</sup>

Again uniquely, the AIDS epidemic allowed some gay and lesbian activists access to people in power because they were now experts on HIV/AIDS as well as being gay or lesbian. At times, gay and lesbian activists were able to call on these connections and use them in advocating for lesbian and gay equal rights.

Another challenge highlighted by the AIDS epidemic that lesbian and gay activists have long faced was negotiating the tension that existed between combating the existing hyper-sexualized connotation of lesbian and gay people and overcompensating for that image by instead presenting lesbian and gay people as desexualized as possible. Urvashi Vaid, former NGLTF executive director and long-time progressive queer activist, notes,

Admitting [sex's] true power over our lives threatens the foundations of denial on which we have built what we call social order... To many heterosexuals, gay people are defined by what they do, rather than as the human beings they are, and this distinction leads straights to challenge how behavior can become a civil rights issue... To counter the equation, the gay rights movement has long strived to define gayness as an identity at once rooted in, but more significant than, our sexual behavior alone.<sup>130</sup>

Unfortunately, those marginalized and oppressed because of their racial, class, and queer position are often pathologized as deviant. This often translated to assaults, harassment, and rape of poor women, women of color, and

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<sup>129</sup> D'Emilio, John. "After Stonewall" from D'Emilio, John. *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*. New York: Routledge, 1992. pp. 234-274. Page 265-266.

<sup>130</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996. Page 191.

femininely-gendered queer people being considered either “made up” or insignificant because of how such subjects were assumed to have “asked for it.” At the same time, those in power have a history of punishing Black, Latino, and indigenous men,<sup>131</sup> poor men, and masculinely-gendered queer women for any possible “threats” to the sanctity of white, middle and upper class feminine womanhood or white middle and upper class straight men’s property rights. White lesbian and gay leaders have assumed leadership over those who are marginalized due to race and/or class and have in part been supported in doing so because they are free of such race-based stereotypes. As a result, the lesbian and gay people who can most successfully avoid or even simply minimize the connotation of hyper-sexuality are white and middle or upper class simply because society does not lay the same sort of blanket group stereotypes on these privileged and “invisible” identities. So white gay, lesbian, and bisexual activists have been able to concentrate on combating stereotypes of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people being promiscuous or pedophiles rather than complicated intersecting connotations.

Rather than actively engaging with or challenging the problematic and unjustified sexualized racism, organizers frequently chose to avoid presenting a public face for the lesbian and gay community that was marked with multiple oppressions. The strategy here was most likely to have legislators and

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<sup>131</sup> White men have punished Black, Latino, and indigenous men because they are assumed to be a threat to white women, who are assumed to be white men’s property. While Asian men not been perceived as a sexual threat, they have been perceived as an intellectual and economic threat to white men. See P.J. Ling, “A White Woman’s Word: The Scottsboro Case,” from Gordon-Reed, Annette, ed. *Race on Trial: Law and Justice in American History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. p. 118-138. and Kennedy, Randall. *Race, Crime, and the Law*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997. p 136-167.

other people in power to more easily relate to the “poster-people,” since it was assumed that one could more easily isolate one’s lesbian and gay identity if that was the sole unprivileged identity, and work with other common identities. Regardless of how intentional this move was, it served to perpetuate existing inequalities in which white people remained racially unmarked, and so could present themselves as a “universal” gay subject without being questioned about if they were an accurate representation of the community. Because privileged identities are regularly unmarked, minorities within marginalized groups are unable to claim being to be representative of either marginalized community.

### **Support for addressing sexual acts/sexuality within a queer context**

Many of the people hired to work at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in the late 1980s brought with them a vision of sexual liberation as well as an understanding of how sexual freedom was inherent to gaining civil rights for LGBT/queer people. As activists committed to creating change by employing strategies they knew or assumed would work, they also understood that talking explicitly about sexual freedom, and even sexual behavior, in front of legislators and predominantly straight audiences, was likely to be less effective in making political gains than choosing to avoid additional (even relevant) controversial topics would be. They limited frank and open discussions about sexual freedom and behaviors to queer audiences. Still, staff seemed to understand the relevance of sexual liberation to lesbian and gay rights and supported the idea that people should be able to be open

about their sexual practices and interests without having to downplay certain aspects, without being harassed for them, and without feeling ashamed. This in turn meant NGLTF staff members neither shied away from conversations about sex and sexuality in spaces where it seemed that would be productive, nor felt the need to overcompensate for stereotypes about lesbian and gay people being hyper-sexualized or deviant in ways that attempted to recreate lesbian and gay people as desexualized beings.

Since it was founded, NGLTF has never focused on “sexual liberation” as such, nor has any explicit commitment to sexual liberation ever been included in the mission statement or strategic planning. Staff have often been supportive of the vision of sexual freedom on an individual basis. Yet the closest this has come to being NGLTF’s organizational position is its recent partnership with the Woodhull Freedom Foundation (WFF). The WFF is a non-profit organization that works: “to affirm sexual freedom as a fundamental human right by protecting and advancing freedom of speech and sexual expression. WFF promotes sexuality as a positive personal, social and moral value through research, advocacy, activism, education and outreach.”<sup>132</sup> Sean Cahill, current director of NGLTF’s Policy Institute, said this partnership was formed “in the wake of *Lawrence* [*v. Texas*], which was a great decision and struck down these archaic sex laws—[to investigate the numerous] laws [still] on the books which criminalize the possession of sex toys and things like that.”<sup>133</sup> The U.S. Supreme Court’s 2003 ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas* has been widely

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<sup>132</sup> “About Us.” Woodhull Freedom Foundation, 2006.  
<<http://www.woodhullfoundation.org/about/default.aspx>>

<sup>133</sup> Sean Cahill, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 19 September 2005.

acclaimed as overturning anti-sodomy legislation, when it actually only decriminalized consensual homosexual sodomy within private property constraints.<sup>134</sup>

Because NGLTF's underlying goal, as stated in those original 1976 by-laws,<sup>135</sup> has been gaining full equality for lesbian and gay people through obtaining complete civil rights, staff commitment to sexual liberation has only ever affected NGLTF's programming and allocation of resources to the extent that it appeared helpful to a specific existing project. For example, discussing sex frankly and openly in order to effectively field questions seemed a necessary task in fighting to repeal anti-sodomy laws, but also too unfocused and immeasurable a task to dedicate too many resources to. While conversations about queer sexuality are not always appropriate or useful, particularly around legislators, NGLTF could have encouraged public conversations about what might be appropriate at the Town Hall Meetings on Sex and Politics, or opened them with an explanatory reminder to all present how frank discussions of sexuality are tied to achieving equality for lesbian and gay freedom. They also could have initiated a conversation about the long-term effects of

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<sup>134</sup> Interesting little-known (and intentionally down-played) information about the *Lawrence v. Texas* case include that the two men involved were an Black-white interracial couple. They were caught in the privacy of the white man's home by a police officer summoned on an alleged weapons charge, but about which little information has been released except that the Black man's race was mentioned. Scholar Siobhan B. Somerville writes, "while the case has been interpreted as one in which the police enforced a sodomy law to punish two gay men, it is just as plausible that without the presence of an African American man (who also happened to be gay) in a white man's apartment, the police might have chosen a different response (or none at all). As the Harris County sheriff's spokesman noted, there was no record of the sodomy law's ever having been invoked to arrest anyone in a private home prior to this case" ("Queer Loving." *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, 11:3, 2005., pp. 336-370. Page 346.). Amber Hollibaugh also added the analysis that Lambda Legal, a LGBT impact litigation organization representing Lawrence in the case, intentionally deemphasized a number of ways in which the couple failed to fit the monogamous and otherwise normative image of the representative same-sex couple put forth by LGBT advocacy organizations (the couple was also non-monogamous), most notably around the gay marriage debate and proposed same-sex marriage bans.

<sup>135</sup> By-Laws of the National Gay Task Force, Inc, "Article II: Purposes," 13 June 1976 (Box 1, Folder 6), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001).

employing an increasingly sanitized, desexualized rhetorical strategies in rights discourse for lesbian and gay equal rights.

Staff members' ideological commitment to a vision of sexual liberation was only ever made apparent to known queer audiences, whether at queer events, conferences, panels advertised only within the gay community, fundraising gatherings, or other venues. NGLTF staff consciously and strategically chose this audience-specific rhetoric. Sue Hyde says the various feminist, sexual liberation, and anti-establishment countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s had influenced at least progressive circles to the point that "we said very proudly in the '80s, 'There is no dress code for civil rights.' In other words, we don't need to qualify for civil rights by presenting ourselves in any particular or special way."<sup>136</sup> However, given the conservative and increasingly reactionary climate of the US federal and state governments, Hyde says,

I did not go to legislative meetings, hearings, or lobbying visits in anything except business drag—and not because I felt shame because of who I was, but because ...getting dressed up in business drag for those meetings—that was part of my strategy for communication, and a way to make sure that the conversation that we were having was really about what I wanted to talk about.<sup>137</sup>

Hyde presents this as being very much her strategy, and notes, "all through the administrations at the Task Force, we have never had serious discussion about how we ought to be presenting ourselves in legislative contexts, in public forums, any of that."<sup>138</sup> Yet this lack of discussion may have more to do with the fact that staff assumed, based on what they had seen others doing, what was considered

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<sup>136</sup> Sue Hyde, interview by author, digital recording in person, 27 July 2005.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

“appropriate dress” for a given situation rather than because NGLTF board members or supervisory staff actually had no idea of what constituted “proper” attire for various interactions and locations. Former NGLTF board member John D’Emilio recalls:

this is less about maybe the overt agenda and politics of the organization and more about this amorphous thing that you might call style, although style makes it seem trivial and I’m not trying to trivialize it by calling it that. But ...the Task Force by the late ’80’s...it was a nonconformist culture, and one of the ways in which that got expressed, and this was more true among the women than the men, actually, was a sort-of a willingness to play with and talk about butch and femme and gender expression [both personally and externally politically].<sup>139</sup>

So while one’s choice of dress is not directly connected to the degree one supports sexual liberation politics, it seems that for NGLTF staff, there was at least a correlation, if not a clear causation which D’Emilio felt was significant to comment on.

While NGLTF did not make an explicit commitment to sexual liberation, it did commit to increased support for local issues, grassroots organizing, and its membership in its revised mission statement, approved in 1991. By 1985, internal documents for the Board of Directors described the membership as being “not a ‘nuisance’ but [rather] the reason we are in business and the first tier of our target service population. The Membership are thus of paramount import; what they are thinking, what they are doing, who they are, what they value, and what they want are of tremendous significance.”<sup>140</sup> This concern about NGTF membership and the

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<sup>139</sup> John D’Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

<sup>140</sup> “The National Gay Task Force: The Challenge Ahead. A technical proposal for consideration by the Board of Directors.” 20 February 1985 (Box 1, Folder 11), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001). Section I: The Board of Directors, page 1.

broader gay and lesbian community as potential members encouraged especially the Board of Directors to begin considering issues of representation, including race, class, gender, sexual orientation, geographic, and other demographics for both board members and staff. A document created by two board members in 1985 encouraged Task Force staff and board members to consider NGLTF members as “the ‘users’ and the Corporation must endeavour [sic] to become ‘user friendly’ and close to its Membership.”<sup>141</sup> This sentiment indicates that NGLTF was concerned with making sure that their members were engaged with their work at least to the extent that they were talking about it, even if not in demonstrable action-oriented ways. This statement also provides a context beyond the framework of strategic pragmatism, or determining strategy according to what is assumed to be realistically able to achieve results, as to why they would use very different rhetoric with queer audiences.

The revised mission statement also committed NGLTF to fighting discrimination based on, among other things, “sexual diversity.”<sup>142</sup> The statement, approved by the Board of Directors on March 25, 1991, reads:

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is a lesbian and gay civil rights and lobbying organization dedicated to building a movement to promote freedom and full equality for all lesbians and gay men.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force exists to eradicate prejudice, discrimination, violence, and hate crimes against lesbians and gays; to advocate on behalf of lesbians and gays regarding major health issues including AIDS; and to serve its members in a manner that affirms and reflects the diversity of gay and lesbian communities.

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<sup>141</sup> “The National Gay Task Force: The Challenge Ahead. A technical proposal for consideration by the Board of Directors.” 20 February 1985 (Box 1, Folder 11), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001). Section I: The Board of Directors, page 1.

<sup>142</sup> National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Mission Statement, 1991 (Box 1, Folder 4), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.



The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is committed to ending discrimination based on sexual orientation, sexual diversity, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, physical ability, and age; economic injustice; and all other systems and forms of oppression, both within and outside the gay and lesbian community.<sup>143</sup>

No mention is made here of wanting gays and lesbians to be recognized as the same as heterosexual people in all ways except sexual/romantic attraction, or of needing to present in a “normalized” fashion that is sanitized of sex in order to “qualify” for or deserve full rights and equality. Rather, a commitment to affirm and reflect the diversity of the gay and lesbian communities is codified, which can easily be taken to include all sorts of intersecting identities, including race, gender, socio-economic class, religion, and sexual interests. However, “sexual diversity” is also as close as NGLTF comes here to mentioning sexual practices or desires, when they might have made a more explicit commitment to support the right of adults to engage in consensual relationships and dynamics, even if considered unconventional.

In summary, most staff hired to work at the Task Force in the late 1980s came there with experience working for sexual liberation, most often through participation in the so-called “feminist sex wars” of the 1980s, and so brought their analysis of how civil rights work for gay people absolutely needed to decriminalize same-sex sexual acts. They also made clear within the context of office interactions that most or all staff supported sexual freedom, though this was less frequently transferred to initiatives. So even with most progressive initiatives being driven by individual staff members, even with the small staff that NGLTF had in the late 1980s, it was never focused primarily on working for sexual freedom at an organizational level, and staff

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<sup>143</sup> National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Mission Statement, 1991 (Box 1, Folder 4), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.

members' individual commitment to sexual liberation was only voiced to queer audiences. Instead of using the same rhetoric with legislators and straight audiences, NGLTF attempted to emphasize privacy and tried to build connections by making themselves appear as "normal" and as otherwise as similar to those audiences and legislators, who were and remain predominantly white, middle and upper class men, as possible.

The historical context that existed in the late 1980s affected how NGLTF engaged with sexual liberation politics beyond defending the right to privacy. The progressive people who came to work at NGLTF regarded it as being unique in the mid-1980s for its mix of activists from a range of political views. These included moderate activists who were inclined to work within existing governmental structures on single-issue politics; progressive activists who also worked within existing structures seeking reform, but who preferred to engage with multi-issue politics and who were willing to also use non-traditional means; and radical activists, who saw reforms as inherently flawed and believed in systemic change and bottom-up strategies and who were more inclined to support protest demonstrations and street actions. Urvashi Vaid, who went from volunteering with NGLTF in the early 1980s to being NGLTF's Executive Director throughout the early 1990s, appreciated

the ability to go in there as a grassroots organizer, which is what I had been, who had come up from the sort of frontier side of the movement, more sexual liberation oriented, co-gender movement, into what was at that time very much identified as a mainstream, kind of established, gay rights, legislatively-oriented organization... [yet maintaining] a whole network of relationships and associations with progressive politics.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

John D’Emilio believes that while NGLTF staff in the late 1980s did indeed have progressive politics and activist experience, they also often employed rhetoric supportive of sexual liberation exclusively while speaking to lesbian and gay audiences to maintain support from their constituent base. Unfortunately, sexual liberation would only be invoked within the lesbian and gay community, and so was never followed through on with concrete actions or any strategy to apply it to existing initiatives.

More significant than the official mandate or references in internal documents, however, were the actual interactions NGLTF staff had with the broader LGBT/queer community. Vaid explained, “the Task Force...was fueled by and [run] by and appealed to really the activists on the ground, listening to the kind of thinkers and visionaries who were writing about LGBT/queer freedom, and it was about sexual freedom, and it was talking about trans issues, even before...it was very well received”<sup>145</sup>. Because NGLTF strove to effectively address lesbian and gay issues at the national level with an ear to the grassroots, the issues it focused on in late 1980s were anti-gay violence, campus organizing, AIDS, sodomy law repeal, and family/parenting issues.

Projects reflecting staff commitment to the general concept of sexual freedom and sexual liberation included numerous events and campaigns, such as the Town Hall Meetings on Sex and Politics series and work done with public health officials on sodomy law repeal, sponsored by the Privacy Project. The purpose of the Privacy Project was to highlight the states where anti-sodomy laws were still on the books and to initiate contact between NGLTF and local activists for collaboration in the fight to

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<sup>145</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

repeal these laws. Sue Hyde, the Privacy Project’s director, then focused the most of her energy on the states NGLTF believed had the best chance for successfully moving forward legislation that would repeal the existing anti-sodomy laws. The states with activists already working on the issue were Minnesota and Maryland, with different but related work being done to stop additional anti-sodomy legislation being proposed in both New Hampshire and Texas. Hyde recalls:

I traveled to Minnesota when the repeal bill came before committee and worked with people there to plan our legislative strategy—which at the time, what that really amounted to was determining a coherent list of witnesses to testify at the committee hearing. Also, pulling out a significant number of people from the community who attended the hearings, and we did some direct lobbying of some specific legislators on the committee. In Maryland, we did the same piece of work, although, because Maryland is somewhat closer to Washington, DC than is Minnesota, we actually had quite a bit of contact in Maryland. We went to Annapolis two or three times, worked with the Maryland activists on, again, assembling a good list of witnesses to testify at the committee hearings. We did some media work in Maryland, we actually put together a packet of materials to be used in Maryland but that could be rewritten redrafted, slightly, and tweaked, for use in Minnesota and in other states.<sup>146</sup>

However, all of the proposed legislation in these four states was stopped before leaving committee, meaning that nothing overtly positive or negative for the lesbian and gay community succeeded. Therefore, “stage two” of the Privacy Project’s work was finding people willing to organize in the other states with anti-sodomy laws, but that had little to no lesbian and gay political organizing happening. To this end, Hyde conducted a “Sodomy Tour” in 1987. For this, she traveled through six Southern states to meet with local leaders during their Pride celebrations and have conversations with them about possibly starting statewide LGBT advocacy organizations.

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<sup>146</sup> Sue Hyde, interview by author, digital recording in person, 27 July 2005.

The Privacy Project also coordinated much of NGLTF's visible presence at the 1987 March on Washington. For the public march and demonstrations, Sue Hyde described the NGLTF-produced signs as being,

a series of placards with a very nice image of two persons, two humans not specific to gender, in an embrace, ...behind jail type bars, with the phrase "Never another jailed for love" at the top, and then at the bottom, on every one it said, "Repeal" and then there was a blank, and in the blank we wrote the specific statute and the specific state that we wanted to see repealed.<sup>147</sup>

Hyde noted that these were distributed to the state delegations along with packets of material for state activists on a set of issues pressing at the time of the 1987 March. In a situation where media would be present, a clear and concise message was important, as well as one that was not alienating, and that would not make potential supporters uncomfortable. Thus, privacy and love—much more palatable to the general public than the radical concept of sexual freedom—were stressed to non-queer audiences to maximize the chance of gaining support through a message that could resonate regardless of the listener's sexual orientation.

While sodomy law repeal activism actively addressed how lesbian and gay communities were targeted with very little effort towards building coalitions with other affected identity groups,<sup>148</sup> NGLTF's AIDS activism and advocacy work focused on coalition building in order to challenge the prevailing assumption that AIDS was a gay male affliction. The reigning strategy for effective AIDS advocacy was not to desexualize AIDS, but to "de-gay" it. Activists Ben Schatz and Eric Rofes

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<sup>147</sup> Sue Hyde, interview by author, digital recording in person, 27 July 2005.

<sup>148</sup> Some work was done by disability activists supporting sodomy law repeal because of how often anti-sodomy laws encompassed some of the only types of sex people with some physical disabilities are able to have. So while disabled people were not targeted for policing and persecution in the same way that LGBT people often were, the laws also technically criminalized their sexual behavior. From various workshop presenters at 2006 Creating Change conference in (dis)ability-focused workshops.

coined the term “de-gaying” to refer to the strategic push to remove as much as was possible “the stigma of homosexuality from the stigma of AIDS in order to win the access and attention.”<sup>149</sup> Advocacy work around the AIDS epidemic, though led by lesbian and gay organizations, focused heavily on the public health perspective and prevention education. This functioned to largely remove the lesbian and gay community from the conversation, both strategically so that the issue would actually receive attention and from the fact that HIV/AIDS is not a virus that only affects the lesbian and gay community. Vaid notes that this consciously-made decision also meant that the lesbian and gay community:

chose to focus on AIDS rather than on homophobia and racism, even though these were the causes of the governmental and societal paralysis...we pressed forward on AIDS-specific issues while avoiding gay and lesbian rights issues...in our attempt to get a governmental response to AIDS, we employed a strategy that left the gay movement at the mercy of the homophobic, sex-phobic, and racist government.<sup>150</sup>

It is important to note, though, that some scholars, like Patrick Moore, believe that the de-gaying strategy was very much a result of the fact that the gay liberation and civil rights movements were so young, and that they may have employed a different framework of supporting and celebrating difference and requiring inclusion.<sup>151</sup>

Because the intersections of racism and homophobia were so striking in how AIDS advocacy was structured, particularly in how the white lesbian and gay community avoided discussing sex whenever possible in AIDS advocacy, I will address how NGLTF interacted with the AIDS epidemic more in Chapter Three.

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<sup>149</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996. Page 75.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> Moore, Patrick. *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. Page 11.

NGLTF staff also demonstrated that they were supportive of the lesbian and gay BDSM (Bondage/Disciplines, Dominance/Submission, Sado-Masochism)/leather community through their work fighting government restrictions on publicly-funded art. These restrictions were proposed in response to the Christian Coalition’s use of publicly-funded art created by Robert Mapplethorpe in the late 1980s to anger people about this “inappropriate” use of their tax dollars and the subsequent media attention that ensued. Mapplethorpe’s 1989 *The Perfect Moment* show<sup>152</sup> was the specific cause for such concern and outrage because it included interracial, sadomasochistic portraits and candid photographs of children including some with genitals visible. The uproar about Mapplethorpe was also “part of [a] larger attack on the NEA<sup>153</sup> in 1989, [through which] the Christian Right projected its own fears and fantasies (of homosexuality, of sadomasochism, of child pornography) onto the figure of Mapplethorpe.”<sup>154</sup> Particularly true given this broader context, scholar Carole Vance wrote, ““If we are afraid to offer a public defense of sexual images... then even in our rebuttal we have granted the right wing its most basic premise: sexuality is shameful and discrediting.””<sup>155</sup> Though there were not materials in the archives that give NGLTF’s organizational rationale for lobbying around the NEA controversy, it is intuitive that Vance’s position would have factored into their thinking on this subject.

While other gay and lesbian artists were also affected by or even directly attacked in the media during the funding debates, Mapplethorpe received the most

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<sup>152</sup> Meyer, Richard. *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Page 4.

<sup>153</sup> Mapplethorpe was only one of a number of artists targeted by the Christian Coalition in this action.

<sup>154</sup> Meyer, Richard. *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Page 209.

<sup>155</sup> Meyer, Richard. *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Page 217-218.

attention. This likely had to do with his position as a white man, who was therefore more apt to receive attention for producing controversial art because of how it was rather unexpected. Art historian Richard Meyer notes:

For a work of art to arouse a public controversy, it must cross a certain threshold of visibility—whether through museum or gallery exhibition, visual reproduction in the press, or public attacks by would-be censors. Until quite recently, visual art by and about lesbians has been restricted from reaching this threshold of visibility within American culture....the relative invisibility of lesbian art—and of public conflicts concerning lesbian art—constitutes a ‘structuring absence’ within twentieth-century American culture, an absence imposed not by chance but by historically specific exclusions and inequities.<sup>156</sup>

This “threshold of visibility” refers to art made by people of color as well as by lesbians. The Christian Coalition also attacked Marlon Riggs,<sup>157</sup> a Black gay male filmmaker, by sending clips from his NEA-funded documentary to every member of the US Congress.<sup>158</sup> These clips were a few minutes of the most sensationalized material in the documentary, intended to incite conservative legislators. This explicit omission of Riggs may be a result of all NEA-funding work being lumped under the catch-phrase of Mapplethorpe. The attack on Riggs occurred around the same time period as Mapplethorpe and was done by the Christian Coalition with similar tactics and the same goal of putting significant restrictions on who could receive NEA funding, as well as for what projects. Yet, NGLTF failed to directly address the fact that Riggs was attacked because of his intersectional work on homophobia and racism

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<sup>156</sup> Meyer, Richard. *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Page 22.

<sup>157</sup> None of the people I interviewed mentioned Riggs, and I do not recall finding any information about him in the sections of NGLTF’s archives that I used.

<sup>158</sup> From “Marlon T. Riggs: Biography of Marlon Riggs,” Queer Cultural Center. <<http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/Riggs/RiggsBio.html>> Accessed 17 December 2006.



experienced by gay Black men, possibly because they were also scared to address that intersection with legislators.

Conservative Senator Helms (R-NC) is well known for his attempts to pass many “no promo homo” (no promotion of homosexuality) bills and amendments. In response to learning about Mapplethorpe’s NEA funded photographs and Riggs’ filmography, he attempted to pass legislation that would no longer allow gay artists to receive funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) at all, and that also prohibited the NEA from funding ““obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts.””<sup>159</sup> The section disqualifying gay artists from receiving funding failed to pass in 1989, but Congress did successfully add a “decency clause” to the funding procedures for NEA grant applications in 1990. “The clause decreed that the NEA must ensure that ‘artistic excellence and artistic merit are the criteria by which applications are judged, taking into consideration general standards of decency and respect for diverse beliefs and values of the American public.’”<sup>160</sup>

NGLTF lobbyist Peri Jude Radecic had board support and the freedom to devote some of her time in the late 1980s to outreach to queer BDSM/leather communities following controversies over National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding. The situation arose mainly because Senator Helms was upset that federal arts money was going to gay artists, including at the time Robert Mapplethorpe and his documentation of the gay male leather community. As NGLTF’s lobbyist for non-

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<sup>159</sup> Meyer, Richard. *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Page 278.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

HIV/AIDS issues at the time, Radecic was the main person working on this issue. She said, “I can’t recall a time when I didn’t have the freedom to do something...there was never anything that stopped us from being involved in things. I never felt like I was restricted in any way.”<sup>161</sup> Radecic worked on the attacks on NEA funding in three main ways: attending arts coalition meetings whenever possible, communicating directly with people at the NEA and in Congress, and working with the BDSM/leather community. At the arts coalition meetings she strove to educate artists of all varieties on BDSM/leather and the LGBT/queer community, focusing on how artists could defend these artists like Mapplethorpe on the basis of anti-censorship and artistic license while also understanding more about what his documentary photographs depicted. When at BDSM/leather events and spaces, she worked to encourage leatherfolk to be more political and stand up and speak out more for themselves and their community. After prepping them, she would then go with them to Capital Hill so that they could speak directly with congressional staff and the arts community and arts lobbyists.<sup>162</sup> John D’Emilio notes, particularly around NGLTF’s response to the NEA situation, “the fact that this is an organization that had been having Town Meetings on Sex and Politics, that they got the significance of that going on ...Rather, it was part of the culture of the organization to see it as something that we should work on.”<sup>163</sup> Though even the work done around the NEA controversy was led primarily by Radecic, NGLTF saw the connections that existed to Senator Helms’ other no-promo homo amendments and thus sufficient reason to dedicate organizational resources to this fight.

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<sup>161</sup> Peri Jude Radecic, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 13 September 2005.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Interview with John D’Emilio, Friday, September 23, 2005, 11:30am EST.

## Strategically Addressing Sex with Legislators

Part of the freedom both Radecic and Hyde, as well as other staff, were allowed likely resulted from their good sense of when and to whom it was okay to say certain things. Peri Jude Radecic, former lobbyist for NGLTF, recalls,

Certainly when we were in a queer crowd...we talked about it more freely as sexual liberation. When we were in mainstream media, I believe our discussions were a little more conservative, and we...geared messages which would play well to a mainstream crowd...I believe when we were...in queer crowds, we spoke more freely about sexual liberation as part of our civil rights agenda—we were repealing sodomy laws not just because they were offensive, but because it was going to lead to some sexual liberation. But when we were pushing legislative issues, you gotta gear your message to your audience. And when you're up on the Hill dealing with people, you have to have a more mainstream message... it's actually something that I think is pretty common amongst groups that are seeking public policy change, that you talk more freely when you're with each other than when you're trying to advocate for public policy change and you need to broaden your message and appeal to people at different levels, levels that may not build your supporters, build your foundation or bring in gay dollars into an organization, when you're trying to appeal to broader folks.<sup>164</sup>

Hyde confirmed that this strategic audience-determined discussion was used, “Because legislators...don't want to talk about [sexuality and sexual behavior]—they feel much more comfortable talking about privacy, privacy rights, privacy protection.”<sup>165</sup> Attempting to have frank discussions about sex would have been ineffective at gaining legislative support, the goal of meeting with them to begin with.

Radecic said, “I don't remember the community<sup>166</sup> ever criticizing the Task Force for being active in sexuality issues, like sodomy repeal, or the NEA.”<sup>167</sup> She

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<sup>164</sup> Peri Jude Radecic, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 13 September 2005.

<sup>165</sup> Sue Hyde, interview by author, digital recording in person, 27 July 2005.

<sup>166</sup> While the LGBT community was not vocal specifically about Radecic's work lobbying for no new congressional restrictions on NEA funding, anti-BDSM/leather sentiments were more commonly voiced in various ways and locations. An example from the gay liberation publication *Gay Sunshine* is

also did not recall hearing NGLTF criticized for its staff members' discussions about their sexual interests. Possibly in part because the organization itself was not usually targeted for criticism for openly engaging in discussions about sex, the staff often led outreach to populations within the LGBT/queer community that were underrepresented at the national level, including bisexual and BDSM/leather communities to seek support for the organization's work or increased membership. Yet the staff who seemed to initiate outreach to such underrepresented groups most frequently did so when their identities and communities were also at stake, with people of color on staff building connections to other LGBT/queer people of color and leatherfolk on staff reaching out to LGBT/queer BDSM communities.<sup>168</sup>

D'Emilio posits, "there was a kind of—here's the way to describe it—queer sensibility about it, just at the point at which queer was starting to surface as a word, there was kind of a queer sensibility to the culture of the Task Force. And again, this is more about the staff than about the board."<sup>169</sup> Even within the staff, though, it was more about the individual staff than it was about the organization making a dedicated effort or allocating resources to such outreach work.

Within the LGBT/queer community, Hyde and Vaid were upfront about their rationale for encouraging discussions of sex within the LGBT community. Their

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writer Ray Ryan saying in his 1970 "Advice to a Wartorn," "We should cultivate a strong sense of dignity around our person, our bodies, rid ourselves of the repressive sexual habits which kept us down in filth—masochism...and sadism...Sexual freedom is not freedom to degrade oneself. We should learn to love fraternally, honestly, in a comradely fashion which is befitting to revolutionary men, not as sexual objects." From Moore, Patrick. *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. Page 18.

<sup>167</sup> Sue Hyde, interview by author, digital recording in person, 27 July 2005.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> John D'Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

response to an editorial published in the national lesbian and gay magazine *The Advocate*, included the argument:

That there is a connection between our movement for liberation and our sexuality: we are oppressed by a majoritarian culture because of how and with whom we have sex. It does not matter to hetero-culture if we are single, married for thirty years, with kids or without—we are hated because of the fact that we have sex with each other.

The basic question we pose at the Sex & Politics Town Meetings is how do we as a political movement address this fact? How do we politically respond to the characterization of lesbianism and gayness as “perverted” or “unnatural” because of the acts we perform? The Town Meetings have elicited a wonderful range of responses from lesbians and gay men...

Our movement has a duty to resist political control of sexuality and to challenge the definitions of lesbians and gay men as “perverted, unnatural, criminal, abnormal.”<sup>170</sup>

Interestingly, this letter was not published but was sent directly to the author of the editorial challenging the importance of connecting rights for gays and lesbians with frank discussions of sex and sexual politics, and carbon copied to the editor of *The Advocate* for informative purposes. It appears that Hyde and Vaid felt it was important to correct the author’s misconceptions, but not to put that correction into a print version that would have been available to a much broader audience and potentially used against the Task Force in the future.

In 1985, the National Gay Task Force changed its name to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) and moved its offices from New York City to Washington, D.C. to make its increasing focus on federal law and policy easier to facilitate. Within a year of this transition, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on *Bowers v. Hardwick*, maintaining the constitutionality of sodomy laws in the twenty-five states

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<sup>170</sup> Letter to Dave Walter from Sue Hyde and Urvashi Vaid, 3 January 1989 (Box 12, Folder 18), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.

that still had them on the books. In response, NGLTF hired Sue Hyde to direct the Privacy Project, whose mission was to support the repeal of sodomy laws on a state-to-state basis. Hyde went on a “Sodomy Tour” in 1987, which focused on states in the southeastern United States, where she educated people at Pride events and facilitated the founding of numerous state-wide gay and lesbian political organizations (where previously none had existed) to work on sodomy law repeal as well as other issues of concern to gay and lesbian residents. Besides the Sodomy Tour, the Privacy Project also organized a series of Town Meetings on Sex and Politics for the lesbian and gay community intended to jumpstart internal community dialogues about how to address sex and political struggles in ways that felt comfortable. It also coordinated the National Day of Mourning for the Right to Privacy with activists from Pittsburgh, PA to mark the third year anniversary of the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision. The Privacy Project also provided regular technical support to local organizers, including sharing of resources, providing training and materials for lobby days, and supporting and presenting legislative testimonies.

NGLTF’s Sue Hyde said staff recognized how unprepared most of the gay and lesbian community was to talk about sexual practices comfortably enough to be able to determine good strategies, sound bites, and responses for legislators and other public officials or people with influence. To encourage people to be building that comfort, NGLTF hosted a series of “Town Meetings on Sex and Politics,” beginning with one at the 1987 March on Washington, to provide a space for this intra-community dialogue to begin. NGLTF’s Military Freedom Project, Family Project, and much its AIDS/HIV work was all very much tied to the Privacy Project’s work,

as sodomy laws were increasingly used as the excuse for why gays and lesbians were targeted in the military, why lesbian mothers were deemed unfit parents and thus lost custody of their children, and why effective and informative HIV prevention education materials were not able to be funded by various governmental agencies.<sup>171</sup> Hyde also admits, “In terms of the sodomy repeal work, we were never able to generate that much interest among LGBT<sup>172</sup> people of color—not that we were necessarily adept at it, but efforts made, ...as ineffective as they...probably were, didn’t make much headway on that.”<sup>173</sup> She acknowledges, “in terms of the history of racism in this country, in particular in relation to African American men, there’s that social-cultural history stereotyping African American men as having uncontrollable sexuality, ...predatory behavior on white women.”<sup>174</sup> She said that she understood why people of color might be less interested in working on sodomy law reform than they might be in working on anti-violence and bias crime work, around which more effective and lasting multi-racial coalitions have historically been formed.

Repeal of anti-sodomy laws, driven by white gay activists, would affect the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community positively in one sense because sexual acts associated most commonly with gay and lesbian people would no longer be illegal. However, because many people of color have been stereotyped by a long history of racism as being hyper-sexualized in ways that white people have perceived as “threatening,” lesbian, gay, and bisexual people of color may have been less

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<sup>171</sup> Sue Hyde, interview by author, digital recording in person, 27 July 2005.

<sup>172</sup> I use “LGBT” here because that is what Hyde said, but I think that she only used it out of habit, and without actual thought about the inclusion of and outreach to transpeople (whether white or people of color) in sodomy repeal work.

<sup>173</sup> Sue Hyde, interview by author, digital recording in person, 27 July 2005.

<sup>174</sup> Urvasi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

interested in working on sodomy law repeal. They also may have been more reluctant to use the rhetoric of privacy given how communities of color are more heavily scrutinized and policed for potential criminal or otherwise “dangerous” activity. It could also be dangerous to queer people of color, for whom straight people might interpret openly working on sodomy law repeal as a confirmation of the people of color’s criminal/deviant sexual tendencies that might then incite harmful reactions. Scholar Evelyn Hammonds has theorized that specifically black women have responded to the societal assumptions of black women’s hypersexuality “with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility”<sup>175</sup> in an attempt to simultaneously neutralize such connotations by providing them with no supporting evidence, even in isolated individuals or incidents and to gain respectability. Hammonds also notes that; “The most enduring and problematic aspect of this ‘politics of silence’ is that in choosing silence, black women have also lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality,”<sup>176</sup> a consequence which applies in many ways to the lack of involvement of many people of color in such public forums to discuss gay and lesbian sexuality.

In events like the Town Meetings on Sex and Politics, Hyde said she consistently tried to ensure that speakers would integrate race, gender, class, and other axes of difference into what they said, ideally with an understanding of how overarching systems of oppression worked. Hyde also said she hoped that bringing

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<sup>175</sup> Hammonds, Evelyn M. “Towards a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence.” from Alexander, Jacqui M. and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Page 171.

<sup>176</sup> Hammonds, Evelyn M. “Towards a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence.” from Alexander, Jacqui M. and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Page 175.



these issues up in a public forum would also mean that conversations around those topics and how they related to sexual freedom would continue after the forum had ended. She did not say how much of a priority this was, though.

Hyde saw the Town Halls as being absolutely necessary to NGLTF's work on repealing anti-sodomy laws, even if they did not result in immediate action witnessed even by people working closely with NGLTF at the time, like John D'Emilio. Its purpose was frank and open intra-community discussion intended to spark a continuing dialogue in LGBT/queer communities across the country around the topic of how to address sex in political work. This was done as a strategic move at the time, because, as Sue Hyde presented it,

We probably couldn't ask people to take up this issue [of talking about sex after the *Bowers v. Hardwick* ruling] without also inviting them to have an intercommunity conversation about it. It is complicated to talk about sex and sexuality in a public context, it's even more complicated to talk about it in a legislative context... so this was a way to increase the confidence that people might have, as they started to think about it and talk about it amongst themselves, to take the conversation public, to take the conversation up to their, into their statehouses.<sup>177</sup>

Because these were very much intra-community events intended to be fun as well as dialogue-provoking, they were opened with light remarks. Sue Hyde opened the March on Washington town hall with a group exercise, one she used repeatedly in the speeches she gave on behalf of the Privacy Project to queer audiences. She asked everyone “to raise your hands and wiggle your fingers. And stick out your tongues—aaaa—and wiggle them around. Thank you, thank you. Okay, now, you've just exercised three instruments of sexual misconduct in the state of Missouri,”<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Peri Jude Radecic, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 13 September 2005.

<sup>178</sup> Welcome remarks and introduction by Sue Hyde at the NGLTF-sponsored Town Meeting on Sex and Politics in Washington, D.C., 10 October 1987, (transcribed from audiotape *tr. 7867a* by Paige

delivering a line that received much laughter and applause, but also brought home the serious need for the repeal of anti-sodomy laws.

For the New York City Town Meeting on Sex and Politics, held on June 22, 1988,<sup>179</sup> Hyde used her quick wit and played with the inevitability of the heat. She opened it with, “Well, I’d like to welcome everybody to the hottest town meeting that has ever happened.” Someone in the crowd responded by adding, “And no one’s even said anything yet,” off of which she easily joked, “well, we did promise you a hot time, so here we are. I just want to say one thing. Some people say we will burn in hell, and I want to be perfectly clear—this is not it.”<sup>180</sup> From there, though, she launched into a brief overview of the effects of sodomy laws and Senator Helms’ “no promo homo” amendments, she concluded her introduction with the following:

We’re here tonight to consider our own sexualities in the hope that by better understanding what is good and right and healthful about ourselves, we’ll be better equipped to assert that in a majoritarian political system, which exists to promote and condone and encourage its own heterosexist ideology. We have met the government, and it is certainly not us. But imagine how different, and how much stronger our political movement might be if we grasped a simple fact: it is our sexuality that makes us vulnerable, and it is our sexuality that will be the source of our collective power. We know things that most non-gay people will never know about the vulnerability and power of sexuality, because they bury themselves in fear. I don’t much care if we dig them out, but I care a lot about our survival. I hope you’ll find this evening useful, informative, and naturally, very stimulating.<sup>181</sup>

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Kruza), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.

<sup>179</sup> The Town Meetings at the March on Washington and in New York City were the only ones which had with information about them included in the NGLTF archives at Cornell University.

<sup>180</sup> Exchange between Sue Hyde and unknown audience member at the NGLTF-sponsored Town Meeting on Sex and Politics in New York City, 22 June 1988 (transcribed from audiotape *tr. 7871a* by Paige Kruza), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.

<sup>181</sup> Welcome remarks and introduction by Sue Hyde at the NGLTF-sponsored Town Meeting on Sex and Politics in New York City, 22 June 1988 (transcribed from audiotape *tr. 7871a* by Paige Kruza), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.

Throughout Hyde's comments, she strung together humor and an understanding of the importance of being able to talk freely and comfortably about sex in some spaces with the hard political and legislative facts of the moment to frame intra-community discussions in a way which would promote ongoing discussion after the meeting was over.

Though the Privacy Project organized over ten town hall meetings in different locations about Sex and Politics between 1987 and 1989, people who have worked with NGLTF did not see them as resulting in any visible political action. Such events were not directly effective in actually repealing sodomy laws, but they were intended to draw LGBT/queer audiences who would then help raise awareness and support for necessary political mobilization. John D'Emilio, former board member and employee, who also moderated the first of the Town Hall Meetings on Sex and Politics, recalls the series of Town Meetings on Sex and Politics, with a focus on the kickoff one held during the weekend of the 1987 March on Washington, as never actually translating into any solid actions or otherwise having a notable impact on organizing.

It was sort of like the Task Force helping to create a cultural space in which discussion of sexuality and that sexuality as a public issue and a political issue could occur. Where that led, I don't know how you would measure that... I don't know where it went. It was great fun. Believe me, you call for a town meeting on Sex and Politics and people show up. But unlike another type of meeting that might then lead to a series of actions in the world and lead to a series of institutional changes or organization, great as these were, I don't know that they went anywhere.<sup>182</sup>

Yet the language used by NGLTF staff when talking to lesbian and gay audiences at the town halls shows how sexual liberation was used as a rallying goal within the community as well as a concept understood and supported by NGLTF staff. For

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<sup>182</sup> John D'Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

example, in the Sex and Politics forum held in Washington, D.C. in November 1989, speakers are described as saying,

“It’s been a sex movement from the start,” remarked gay activist and writer [and NGLTF board member] Eric Rofes. “Stonewall was a place to get laid”... Abby Talimer, a lesbian activist and staff member of the New York-based Fund for Human Dignity, said, “Sex is not tangential but [is] a political part of our landscape... Our movement is about fighting for rights to consensual sex for all, not just [for] what is politically expedient.”<sup>183</sup>

John D’Emilio maintains that the type of rhetoric espoused at the Sex and Politics meetings “didn’t translate into anything... [and were just] speeches they gave to gatherings of activists.”<sup>184</sup> Peri Jude Radecic, NGLTF’s lobbyist around non-AIDS issues during the 1987 March on Washington, failed to even recall that such a forum had been held at the march. She was the key organizer of that weekend’s lobby day around legislative issues relevant to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people—the gay and lesbian civil rights bill and hate crimes education and legislation—and yet had no memory of it. That she could not speak to any ways in which the series actually interacted with or impacted organizing and lobbying practices confirms D’Emilio’s earlier assertion that these Town Meetings did not result in any concrete actions taken by organizers. And while Radecic did remember speaking at a Town Meeting on Sex and Politics held a few years later in St. Louis, Missouri, she only recalled that because of the criticism she received in the St. Louis feminist paper for her involvement in the BDSM community.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Photocopy of Dave Walter’s article “Sex,” from *The Advocate*, 3 January 1989 (Box 12, Folder 18), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.

<sup>184</sup> John D’Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

<sup>185</sup> Peri Jude Radecic, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 13 September 2005.

The Privacy Project also sponsored the Sue Hyde's "Sodomy Tour" of the USA in the summer of 1987. Hyde was hired as the director of the Privacy Project at the beginning of 1987 to work on repealing sodomy laws on a state-by-state basis. Hyde says that while there was a great deal of criticism of the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision on a rhetorical level,

there needed to be a concerted effort to do community organizing in the states that still maintained sodomy laws...many of which were in the southeastern area of the United States, where at the time, political organizing on behalf of our community was functioning...if at all...at a community building, identity solidification phase.<sup>186</sup>

Many of the twenty-five states that maintained anti-sodomy laws simply did not have the capacity or organization required to tackle legislative or political issues, so much of Hyde's work focused on education, capacity building, and technical support to state lesbian and gay organizations. Mainly because of the work that the Privacy Project did around queer sex, Hyde is understood, both by John D'Emilio and Peri Jude Radecic, as being the person who "had the greatest impact, internally, on talking about sexuality...she approached it from both a personal and an academic perspective, and a political perspective, and she talked very effectively at all three levels."<sup>187</sup> This makes sense given how each project during the late 1980s and early 1990s was staffed by one person who had a great deal of freedom in how they worked. It is also indicative of how NGLTF has engaged with issues relevant to, but not often included in the mainstream gay agenda of obtaining civil rights, when a staff member took that effort on because of their individual interest rather than because of organizational encouragement to do so.

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<sup>186</sup> Sue Hyde, interview by author, digital recording in person, 27 July 2005.

<sup>187</sup> Quotation from interview with Peri Jude Radecic, with information also from interview with John D'Emilio.

Yet even with strategic decisions made about how to talk about sex in what situations and to what audience, it would have been impossible to do lesbian and gay activism and completely avoid the topic of sex or successfully desexualize and sanitize lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Legislators were proposing quarantining or tattooing HIV positive people, using sodomy laws to refuse funding effective prevention education to people engaging in sexual activities with people of the same sex. New Hampshire even considered reinstating their sodomy law as a protective measure against AIDS/HIV. Therefore, the Privacy Project and those working on HIV/AIDS often tried to get local activists to recognize the connections between sodomy laws being on the books and how to effectively address a public health crisis. And while some parts of the lesbian and gay community thought denying or avoiding talking about sex might be fruitful in gaining civil rights, Sue Hyde's response to that was and is, "those criticisms were rather odd, in the context of the AIDS epidemic. It seems to me that the AIDS epidemic called us even further into that conversation, not avoiding it or shying away from it, so to me it never made any sense."<sup>188</sup> She also said that while working at NGLTF, she was never told, by either her superiors or board members, to not talk about sex, or to talk about sex in a significantly different way than she had been.

This strategy was also no doubt applied to the NEA controversy. Staff lobbyist Peri Jude Radecic led NGLTF's response to the NEA funding controversy. As a member of the BDSM/leather community herself, she took the lead on contacting queer BDSM/leather groups to train their members in how to both lobby Congress about the funding debate and so that they could articulate their own

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<sup>188</sup> Sue Hyde, interview by author, digital recording in person, 27 July 2005.

activities and desires in a concise and more palatable a way to the mainstream legislators and media. Yet she also worked extensively with the arts community and directly talking to congressional staff, when she employed more anti-censorship arguments and rhetoric about modern art and the limits of artistic license. Though this was very much individually initiated and driven, John D’Emilio attributes the fact this was allowed to happen at all by noting:

The Task Force by the late ’80s, what made it sort of interesting is that it was a very unorthodox and non-conforming group of people. It’s not an accident that the Task Force, I don’t think it had deep impact in terms of the world at large, but it’s not an accident that it was the Task Force that would sponsor these Town Meetings on Sex and Politics. At a time when, especially because of AIDS, but also as well because of the increasing power of the Right, that [the predominant strategy was] “...Let’s put sex away! Let’s not talk about sex; let’s talk about civil rights!”<sup>189</sup>

NGLTF’s staff’s prior involvement in and ongoing commitment to a broader movement for progressive social change was certainly integral to how they engaged with discussing sexuality in different spaces. The existing NGLTF organizational culture also assured that while lesbian and gay people were not desexualized, the sexualities discussed and made visible were predominantly white (and unmarked as such). A notable exception to this was within some HIV/AIDS contexts, but these were complicated by assumptions that HIV-positive Black and Latino people had contracted the virus through intravenous drug use, so in many ways queer sexual acts were still avoided.

## **Conclusion**

While NGLTF has never been an organization primarily concerned with sexual freedom, many of its staff members have long acknowledged that sexual

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<sup>189</sup> John D’Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

freedom is intrinsically linked with obtaining equal rights and fair treatment for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. However, this has largely been led by white lesbian and gay people reluctant to address issues of race. While the AIDS epidemic allowed lesbian, gay, and bisexual people of color unique opportunities to gain access to recognized leadership positions, the discourse around AIDS education and advocacy put forth by national lesbian and gay leaders tended to be as desexualized as possible while still being aware of good public health prevention strategies. Sodomy reform was discussed very differently depending on the audience, but the arguments about privacy and respectability failed to acknowledge in any audience the class and race challenges to employing a privacy discourse while working for sodomy reform. Also rarely acknowledged was how people of color are already sexualized in specific ways within the USA, and how that interacted with how white lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are also sexualized but nearly always unmarked as white.

Since NGLTF's staff and board of directors tended to allow staff working on the Privacy Project and various lobbying efforts a great deal of freedom, these questions were not addressed because they were not high enough priorities rather than there simply being no space for that possibility. NGLTF has done a laudable job with engaging issues of sexual freedom at all, since so many other national lesbian and gay organizations shy away from any frank discussions of sex. However, even these initiatives were very individually-driven. Largely because of the very good work that has been done by individuals working with NGLTF, its lack of sustained organizational commitment of resources to engaging with race, class, and gender



means that it has helped maintain the white dominated, middle and upper class, mainstream gay agenda that was and remains predominant within the USA.

What NGLTF might have done as an alternative to sanitizing its discourse when addressing advocacy around gay and lesbian civil rights and consciously negotiating its advocacy on AIDS issues into “non-gay” rhetoric would have been to determine an organizational approach rather than relying on individual initiatives. While the strategy individuals chose is actually quite understandable given the urgency they faced and the amount of work needing to be done with limited staff, the board might have made an organizational commitment to recognizing the relationship between gay and lesbian acceptance and greater sexual freedom. This in turn may have affected the ways in which NGLTF approached this relationship throughout the 1990s, when most emphasis on sexual freedom disappeared when the national LGBT agenda shifted away from repealing sodomy laws because it seemed futile and away from AIDS because more non-specifically-gay organizations existed to address those concerns.

### Chapter Three

#### Engaging with Race, Class, Gender, and the Grassroots

[T]he vision of the national gay movement and media narrowed from fighting for liberation, freedom, and social justice to expressing personal pride, achieving visibility, and lobbying for individual equality within existing institutions. What emerged was too often an exclusively gay rights agenda isolated from supposedly nongay issues, such as homelessness, unemployment, welfare, universal health care, union organizing, affirmative action, and abortion rights. To gain recognition and credibility, some gay organizations and media began to aggressively promote the so-called positive image of a generic gay community that is an upscale, mostly male, and mostly white consumer market with mainstream, even traditional, values. Such a strategy derives its power from an unexamined investment in whiteness and middle-class identification.<sup>190</sup>

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's work has been built upon these identifications with whiteness and middle class culture, even though Allan Bérubé does not directly address NGLTF in the above quotation. While the organization has demonstrated scattered and limited support for abortion rights, welfare, universal health care, affirmative action, and homelessness,<sup>191</sup> such support has been unsustainable, with limited allocation of organizational resources. As a result, the work that NGLTF has accomplished connecting lesbian and gay rights with allegedly “non-gay” issues has failed to impact how NGLTF has envisioned its primary task. It has also failed to change the mainstream strategies (or the mainstream people who act as community representatives while employing these strategies) the organization has chosen in its fight to achieve LGBT civil rights.

Yet while organizational resources have not been directed toward (allegedly) “non-gay” issues, most people working with NGLTF have long recognized the importance of supporting at least some social justice issues, whether those were anti-

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<sup>190</sup> Bérubé, Allan. “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays.” from Rasmussen, Birgit Brander, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray, eds. *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. pp. 234-265. Page 235.

<sup>191</sup> From publications of the NGLTF Policy Institute and noted in Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

racism, economic justice, anti-militarization, and/or feminism. To some degree, this commitment has been demonstrated since the early years of NGLTF's existence, when the Board of Directors saw having representation by "women and third world<sup>192</sup> persons"<sup>193</sup>—discussed in these terms, with no recognition of the erasures created for women of color<sup>194</sup> in this phrase—on the board as an important goal. As increasing numbers of people with progressive politics—people who believed in reforming the U.S.'s governmental and economic institutions and society as a whole, particularly around equality for oppressed people on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and other axes of social difference—were hired to work for NGLTF in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they brought their experience of working on a range of social justice issues, including women's rights, prison work, community organizing, federal level lobbying, anti-apartheid work, anti-racism, and public health education. As a result, NGLTF began to explicitly address social justice issues and recognize the institutional structures that were affecting the more specific issues on which projects were actually focusing, whether that was the military, HIV/AIDS, or any other issue. Nonetheless, as an organization that has always focused primarily on mainstream strategies and tactics, like lobbying legislators and other policy makers for explicit legal protections and consideration, much of NGLTF's progressive or radical work

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<sup>192</sup> During the late 1970s to late 1980s, "Third World people" appears to have been used interchangeably with "people of color," as an acknowledgement of the lower social status and means of people of color within the USA rather than to refer to immigrants from "Third World countries" in the USA. From Tsang, Daniel C. "First National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference." *GLBT History, 1976-1987*. 2005.

<sup>193</sup> Draft for a Proposal: Affirmative Action Resolution. 27 May 1981 (Box 1, Folder 20), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001).

<sup>194</sup> While hypothetically representation by "women and people of color" should include women of color twice, in actuality that phrasing and way of thinking tends to result in representation by white women and men of color.

has developed from individual staff members with personal commitments to this work, rather than as a result of encouragement or directives from either the board of directors or the executive director. I argue that NGLTF's attempts to address social justice issues, and particularly racial and economic justice, have been through a series of add-on initiatives in an organization that remains structurally and functionally unchanged. This approach has meant that organizational consideration for positioning NGLTF's civil rights work within a larger framework of sexual freedom has been unsustainable and used primarily as a tactic to maintain NGLTF's constituent base rather than as a consistent approach.

In this chapter, I will first look at what NGLTF has considered social justice issues, and how the board of directors and staff have engaged with these issues. I then look at both the rationale for and impact of doing organizing on the grassroots level, specifically through the Creating Change conference and connecting constituents to state and federal legislators, and how NGLTF's mission statement and strategic plan support grassroots work. Then I also examine how the Task Force staff made some attempts, such as the Military Freedom Project, to include issues that more heavily affected women in the national lesbian and gay agenda, and how that worked in practice. Next, I will examine how race and class were both very much a part of the HIV/AIDS work NGLTF did in the 1980s and how the organization dealt with that. I conclude with an analysis of how, despite these actions, NGLTF has maintained organizational emphasis on items which prioritize the needs of white and middle or upper class lesbian and gay people being on the national lesbian and gay agenda rather than a broader multi-issue agenda, while at the same time being unique at the

national level among LGBT/queer organizations because of the progressive initiatives that individual staff have managed to put forth, albeit implemented as add-ons.

### **Board of Directors**

To some extent, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has recognized the importance of having white women and men and women of color involved in its work since it was founded in 1973 as the National Gay Task Force. The available records document NGTF's early approach to diversity and social justice as focused on achieving gender parity and representation by people of color on board and later staff. While gender parity was usually achieved or close to being achieved, the National Gay Task Force was less successful at having people of color represented on the board to the twenty percent goal, and even having any representation of people of color at all. This was a result of the small amount of actual effort NGTF dedicated towards achieving this goal, even though it was spoken of being important. Not surprisingly given the lack of effort on the part of white board members and prevailing racism, the first African American gay male board member did not stay very long. According to Martin Duberman, an original white board member, this unidentified African American board member made "clear his dissatisfaction with efforts to involve Third World gays in the official movement and insisting that the elimination of racism in the gay world 'should be as much a consideration' as the elimination of sexism."<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Duberman, Martin. "Feminism and Gay Men." *Left Out: The Politics of Exclusion/Essays/1964-1999*. New York: Basic Books, 1999. Page 291.

Betty Powell was the next African American on the board—in fact, the only one, on a board that had thirty people in 1976—but was soon elected co-chair, which allowed her to have a more authoritative voice in meetings than she would have been granted without holding the title of co-chair.<sup>196</sup> Nothing, including contemporary sources written recalling that period, indicates the extent to which other board members questioned, undermined, or tokenized her. However, extrapolating on Urvashi Vaid’s experience leading the organization as a lesbian of color over a decade after Powell stepped down as co-chair, Powell assumedly faced multiple challenges, not limited to tokenization, simply by holding a leadership position in a very white, male organization. John D’Emilio recalls that “racial or ethnic issues tended to kind of surface and [were] put on the agenda ... [around] issues of representation and inclusion [which only ever translated to] making sure that people of color are recruited to the board in significant numbers so their presence becomes real and their voices are heard.”<sup>197</sup> By 1985, there was also a much greater willingness, at least by Task Force staff, to recognize that much more work needed to be done around racial issues. But according to D’Emilio, they were generally not quite yet ready to address racism within the organization or at large.<sup>198</sup>

Although NGTF’s first Black board member indicated that the Task Force needed to work on eliminating racism as much as they worked on eliminating sexism,<sup>199</sup> NGTF also had a great number of difficulties with addressing sexism. Most

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<sup>196</sup> Duberman, Martin. “Feminism and Gay Men.” *Left Out: The Politics of Exclusion/Essays/1964-1999*. New York: Basic Books, 1999. Page 292.

<sup>197</sup> Interview with John D’Emilio, Friday, September 23, 2005, 11:30am EST.

<sup>198</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

<sup>199</sup> Duberman, Martin. “Feminism and Gay Men.” *Left Out: The Politics of Exclusion/Essays/1964-1999*. New York: Basic Books, 1999. Page 291-294.

notably this was expressed by founder and early board member Frank Kameny.

Martin Duberman, also on the first NGTF board of directors, recalls,

Frank would periodically explode during board meetings over the ‘intrusion’ of feminist values. After a weekend board retreat in June 1976, I wrote in my diary, “Every time one of the women talked of the need to end lesbian invisibility or insisted upon the semantic propriety of ‘gay men and lesbians,’ Frank, leaping to apoplectic cue, would either shake his head with vigorous displeasure, mumble something about the ‘fanaticism of revolutionaries,’ or do some of his furious (and infuriating) speechifying about the need to maintain a clear separation between the feminist and gay movements.”<sup>200</sup>

Kameny, a white gay man, saw the division of the feminist and gay movements as important and feasible. While in part his response may have been due to lesbian feminist separatism and how he viewed it as hindering multi-gender homosexual organizing, much of it could also be attributed to his male privilege and sexism. Nonetheless, in 1985, seven years after it was founded, the organization changed its name from the National Gay Task Force to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force to reflect their stated commitment in lesbian issues and to more widely acknowledge the importance they had already claimed to place on gender parity, and issue they had supposedly committed to addressing since they were founded.

NGLTF’s Board of Directors evolved in their support for social justice issues over the 1980s to early 1990s. Initially it was relatively moderate politically and very focused on advancing a single-issue agenda, but grew more progressive and supportive of multi-issue politics and organizing as the increasingly progressive staff members recruited like-minded activists to serve on the board of directors. Once the organization reached the point of having enough staff to accomplish the established

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<sup>200</sup> Duberman, Martin. “Feminism and Gay Men.” *Left Out: The Politics of Exclusion/Essays/1964-1999*. New York: Basic Books, 1999. Page 293-294.

programmatic priorities in the late 1980s, board members were rarely directly involved in programming. While they did generally support the staff in their more progressive work, their purpose was much more focused on fundraising and providing general organizational support.

### **NGLTF Staff**

The staff, rather than the board, has long been the driving force behind NGLTF's progressivism. This was most notable between 1985 and 1989, while Jeff Levi was executive director, and immediately following his departure from NGLTF. Levi was hired by a more moderate board that was dominated by members who supported single-issue organizing and only took race and gender into consideration when pressured to do so by white lesbians, lesbians of color, or gay men of color. Many of the then-board members had also been involved with NGLTF since the first few years of its existence, when it was perceived by John D'Emilio and other LGBT activists in New York in the mid-1970s as being "repulsive because it represented one more stage in the further conservatizing of the movement."<sup>201</sup> Yet while Levi was hired by this board, and was very good at being an insider or mainstream lobbyist, Vaid stresses, "it was not an accident that Jeff hired people like me and Sue Hyde and Ivy [Young] and Peri [Jude Radecic], who could work both the inside and the outside, you know, he valued the outsider thing. We had a great staff rapport."<sup>202</sup> Additionally, despite Levi's reputation as being a traditional lobbyist whose

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<sup>201</sup> John D'Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

<sup>202</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.



presentation and style made many people assume he was more conservative or moderate, Vaid also reports that in working on HIV/AIDS lobbying,

He was talking I think from 1986 on, about how the epidemic implicated our whole health care system, and how what was needed was a systemic response, broadening health care access to poor people, he was talking about all those issues...[including an] analysis on the systemic problems that we were experiencing...it was racism, and it was class, and it was the whole kind of health care system, and its inadequacy at dealing with people in crisis, that was being called up.<sup>203</sup>

Vaid recalls an influx of progressively-minded people between 1986 and 1989. These included herself, Sue Hyde as director of the Privacy Project, Ivy Young as director of the Family Project, Kevin Berrill as director of the Anti-Violence Project, and Peri Jude Radecic as the other lobbyist on staff besides Jeff Levi. Vaid describes this as a team that “argued a lot, and [was] explicitly multi-issue and progressive, really throughout that time, and more and more so.”<sup>204</sup> Together, and because they each had a different take on and experience with “social justice” and therefore focused on different aspects of it in their own work, they were able to challenge and educate one another and move towards more effectively incorporating each others’ aspects into their work.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, NGLTF had only a handful of paid staff members, so the Board inevitably had a lot of hands-on involvement with the organization’s projects and programming. It was during this period that it was also most active in pushing gender parity and a striving for a minimum of twenty percent representation on the board and staff of by people of color. This changed somewhat in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Urvashi Vaid was the Executive Director and

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<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

John D’Emilio was a board co-chair. As co-chair, and one of the more progressive board members, he took it upon himself to “distract” the rest of the Board in a sense and to let Urvashi do the work she needed to do, rather than letting the more moderate, mostly white gay male board members take up a lot of her time dealing with them. The process of hiring Vaid, a vocally progressive woman of color, as the Executive Director of this national organization was a struggle given the more mainstream views of NGLTF’s founders and many of the remaining board members. However, she received a great deal of outside support from NGLTF membership, people who had worked with her, and leaders in the lesbian and gay movement at the time, all who, in Vaid’s words, “saw that it was important for progressives to be in charge of this institution.”<sup>205</sup>

The clearest example of how some board members attempted to undermine her authority was to include in her initial contract a clause that “would have had me going to them ...before I spoke on anything.”<sup>206</sup> Fully aware that this was not at all standard because of friends who were executive directors of other organizations, she refused to agree to that clause. She knew that executive directors are often expected to be the voice of the organization and are hired accordingly, so was unwilling to make herself that reliant on board approval before she said anything on record. However, because of a few progressive board members who acted as allies, and being able to bring on “other great people...by the time [Vaid] left, [the NGLTF] Board

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<sup>205</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

was an unbelievable group that was so supportive<sup>207</sup> of NGLTF's (then notable more progressive) projects.

NGLTF staff also demonstrated their commitment to social justice issues through the coalitions they helped create around legislative issues. Around AIDS legislation, NGLTF joined up with groups like the American Nurses Association, the Medical Association, and the National Association of County Health Officials. While building support for the Hate Crimes Statistics Act, that was finally passed in 1990, Peri Jude Radecic allied NGLTF with the NAACP, People for the American Way, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nei Brith, and the ACLU. This coalition was committed to not letting "sexual orientation be cut out ...[or] any other provisions be watered down."<sup>208</sup>

Internal conflicts about the kind of politics NGLTF should associate itself with were also connected to conflicts around Urvashi Vaid being selected as Executive Director. More moderate and mainstream gay activists founded the organization in 1973, and "so there was kind of opposition on the board... partly it was about the fact that [Urvashi Vaid] was clearly, you know, defining herself as progressive rather than simply liberal. And what that might mean for the organization."<sup>209</sup> However, because board members had term limits and most new board members were encouraged to join the Board by staff members, a shift slowly happened building broad support between Board and staff for more progressive politics. While John D'Emilio notes, "It's still probably too early to talk about it as a multi-issue politics" in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but this did create "the

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<sup>207</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

groundwork for what would be more multi-issue politics.”<sup>210</sup> Nonetheless, Vaid also notes that,

During the next three and a half years [in which she was executive director], incidents of racial and gender intolerance piled up like grime from exhaust, a byproduct of working in a gay and lesbian movement that labors under the same racial prejudice, gender binarism, and heterosexism that weigh down the broader society. Sometimes the insensitive or frankly racist or sexist behavior came from white gay men and women. Other times, it came from feminists and people of color.<sup>211</sup>

She reports facing repeated criticism from donors and members of the broader LGBT community alike simply for her identities as a lesbian of color. Many believed as the executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, she was not appropriately “representative” of the LGBT community or what many white, upper class gay men wanted to have seen as being the LGBT community.

As a leader with multiple marginalized identities and as an activist dedicated to liberation struggles, Vaid also tried to ensure her staff were well-educated about race and gender especially. By the early 1990s, staff received training workshops on anti-racism, transgender issues, and bisexuality in an effort to make all NGTLF staff more aware and better equipped to deal in an informed way with different segments of the LGBT/queer community. Peri Jude Radecic recalls,

We talked about gender and race a lot. And we talked about the race issue, one, in how the movement could do a better job dealing with race issues, and two, how could the Task Force do a better job on race issues. So it was always a topic of conversation, I just always remember having it as an issue to talk about. And at some points, the Task Force did well on these issues, and at other times it seemed like we didn’t do well on these issues.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

<sup>211</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 276.

<sup>212</sup> Peri Jude Radecic, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 13 September 2005..

Yet even with the many connections between racism and classism in the U.S., D’Emilio recalls: “class the least or much less talked about or theorized about and conceptualized about as an agenda item than gender or race.”<sup>213</sup> Vaid noted that, “we were still doing trainings around building a multi-racial movement, to the [at] point which people are so bored with it.”<sup>214</sup> She joked, “You know, [if] you’ve been around eighteen years, you know that training—but we still don’t have [a multi-racial movement]. Right? So we still got to keep doing it.”<sup>215</sup> Her point is that as many training workshops as people go through, they still always need work, especially when working on forms of oppression that they do not personally experience directed at them. This also speaks to the fact that there is no “quick fix” for having systemically anti-oppression organizations, either from workshops or through staff and board representation from diverse communities.

### **Grassroots Outreach**

Since the late 1980s, NGLTF has cultivated its connections to and support from grassroots activists. Urvashi Vaid says that grassroots activism serves to sustain progress within any social movement, since setbacks and advances within social movements especially are often so unpredictable, and progress is dependent on a multitude of interacting factors. She defines grassroots action as,

the broad set of practices that get grouped under the term organizing. Grassroots organizing can involve public education strategies (like tabling at a supermarket), door to door canvassing, electoral activity, leadership training, or specific campaigns to change policies. It can encompass research, analysis,

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<sup>213</sup> John D’Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

<sup>214</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

direct action tools as well as mobilizing strategies that enable constituent voices to be heard in the legislative arena.<sup>216</sup>

Vaid also notes that NGLTF has been willing to employ a wide range of tactics and strategies in its work, including “support[ing] people who use direct action,...work[ing] with the litigators and the lawyers,...organiz[ing] demos and provided support to them,...[employing] think tank and policy analysis work [and] media and public communication strategies...[as well as] tons of training and technical assistance.”<sup>217</sup> John D’Emilio adds that NGLTF has historically combined “outsider and insider stances into an elegantly choreographed—and compellingly innovative—strategy for change...It lobbied and it agitated. It negotiated and it mobilized. It supported breaking the law and changing the law. It tinkered with the system to effect small immediate changes.”<sup>218</sup>

From the late 1980s to 1991, NGLTF’s organizational shifts towards focusing on more progressive issues were codified through the rewriting of the mission statement and the creation of a strategic plan. The new mission statement, approved by the Board of Directors on March 25, 1991, declares:

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is a lesbian and gay civil rights and lobbying organization dedicated to building a movement to promote freedom and full equality for all lesbians and gay men. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force exists to eradicate prejudice, discrimination, violence, and hate crimes against lesbians and gays; to advocate on behalf of lesbians and gays regarding major health issues including AIDS; and to serve its members in a manner that affirms and reflects the diversity of gay and lesbian communities. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is committed to ending discrimination based on sexual orientation, sexual diversity, gender,

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<sup>216</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. “Forward.” From Padilla, Yolanda C., ed. *Gay and Lesbian Rights Organizing: Community-Based Strategies*. Page xxi.

<sup>217</sup> John D’Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

<sup>218</sup> D’Emilio, John. “Organizational Tales: Interpreting the NGLTF Story.” *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. Page 101-102.

race, religion, ethnicity, physical ability, and age; economic injustice; and all other systems and forms of oppression, both within and outside the gay and lesbian community.<sup>219</sup>

This bold statement is quite different from the one issued just over fifteen years earlier, moving from a focus on increasing the self-esteem and self worth of gay people to a focus on promoting full freedom and equality while also striving to represent “the full diversity of gay and lesbian communities.”

The Task Force’s commitment to local organizing and issues and to broader issues of oppression has continued to be codified in the strategic direction set forth in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It puts forth four strategies NGLTF intends to use to “build political power for the LGBT community:

1. Strengthening state and local grassroots activists' power by building their capacity to organize and to initiate and respond appropriately and effectively to a range of political struggles.
2. Arming activists with research, facts, and messages to advance complete equality and refute and expose the homophobic attacks against the LGBT community.
3. Being the unwavering and uncompromising national voice within the LGBT movement, that consistently raises the interconnections between homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, sexism, racism, and classism.
4. Acting as the movement's primary convener and coalition builder including working with non-LGBT allies.<sup>220</sup>

Once again, NGLTF’s practices (and where it has focused its programmatic energies) preceded the codification of those demonstrated commitments in the organization’s mission statement and future strategic plan or direction, as they have for all variations of the Task Force’s mission statements.

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<sup>219</sup> National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Mission Statement, 1991 (Box 1, Folder 4), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.

<sup>220</sup>“Strategic Direction.” *National Gay and Lesbian Task Force*.  
<<http://thetaskforce.org/aboutus/direction.cfm>> Accessed 7 October 2005.

Although the revisions to the mission statement approved in 1991 mark a commitment to fighting discrimination of various kinds and otherwise trying to take intersecting oppressions and identities into account, it took until 1999 for NGLTF to form the Racial and Economic Justice Initiative. The Racial and Economic Justice Initiative was intended to focus the Policy Institute's work on racially and economically oppressed groups within the LGBT/queer community. Vaid described the Policy Institute, founded in 1995, as "a think tank that researched or sought out information about underrepresented voices and populations in our community... we were going to talk about race, we were going to work on it in a meaningful way, we were going to bring out the issues of people of color in our communities and make them visible through research and any other way we could."<sup>221</sup> True to this vision, the Policy Institute has done research on African American LGBT people, Latino same-sex couples, LGBT seniors, and transgender people.<sup>222</sup> It has also tried to help support and train a diverse group of researchers, scholars, and activists doing this work, both before and since the official declaration of the Racial and Economic Justice Initiative.

NGLTF has taken a notably different path in approaching legislators than organizations like the Human Rights Campaign Fund, which has historically relied on campaign donations to secure meetings with a few select supportive legislators to talk about federal issues HRCF has perceived as most pervasively or harmfully affecting the LGBT community (in other words, the issues included on the white, upper class mainstream "LGBT agenda"). The difference between the two organizations is both ideological and practical. Given that NGLTF has far less financial resources than

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<sup>221</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

<sup>222</sup> For a full listing of the reports produced by NGLTF's Policy Institute, see: [http://thetaskforce.org/reports\\_and\\_research/reports](http://thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/reports)



HRCF, and also directs its money towards programs and organizing rather than campaign donations, NGLTF's lobbyists tended to rely on NGLTF membership lists to produce a sufficient number of volunteers to testify at hearings and speak with or write to their individual congress people. This was particularly true in the late 1980s with Peri Jude Radecic, who worked on non-HIV/AIDS policy issues and who would literally go through the membership list (with 10,000-15,000 members at that time) and determine who was in what congressional district and contact them by letter according to that region inquiring if they would like to help the lobbying effort. She would then contact all the people who responded by phone and include them in a NGLTF-specific Congressional lobbying network, from which people could be called upon to help with lobby days, national actions, and providing additional supportive people within their district to contact about communicating with their congress people about specific bills. Because elected officials can only maintain their offices with support from their constituents, they listen to registered voters within their region far before they will to the representatives of advocacy groups (especially those with no significant campaign contributions to help gain attention). So while this is a solid strategy, and effective for an organization with a small budget and wide-spread supporters and members, it was one that was then new to LGBT organizing.

Both Vaid and D'Emilio attribute NGLTF's willingness to employ a multiplicity of tactics and strategies, and particularly its engagement with grassroots activists, to a staff-driven organizational commitment to "a more expansive vision of social justice"<sup>223</sup> than other national LGBT/queer advocacy organizations have

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<sup>223</sup> D'Emilio, John. "Organizational Tales: Interpreting the NGLTF Story." *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. Page 101-102.

demonstrated or espoused. In his analysis of the six major national LGBT advocacy organizations of the late 1990s,<sup>224</sup> scholar Craig Rimmerman notes that “the Task Force is most committed to grassroots political and social change”<sup>225</sup> and gains strength by using that broad base with lobbying efforts in the nation’s capital. He also acknowledges that,

The Task Force is not constituted as a federation of local chapters, but the group’s literature contends that it is building a grassroots movement. It... [as of 1997] has built partnerships with more than 120 local groups through its cooperating Organization program, and coordinates the activities of local and state groups through its ‘activist alert’ network.<sup>226</sup>

While NGLTF has primarily established grassroots connections to support a mainstream LGBT agenda, either through federal lobbying or top-down supplying of resources and technical support about specific issues to state and local activists, D’Emilio believes that its connections to grassroots activism would not have persisted had it not been for the progressiveness of staff, especially during the early 1990s. He recalls,

The whole community that was coming out of the closet in the ’90s was much more mainstream than the Task Force. And the Task Force...was fueled by and ran by and appealed to really the activists

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<sup>224</sup> These are the Human Rights Campaign, a political action committee; NGLTF; the National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum, an organization dedicated to working on issue relevant to black LGBT people; the Log Cabin Republicans, a group for LGBT Republicans; Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, which does impact litigation; and the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, an organization which supports LGBT people running for office regardless of their political affiliations. Rimmerman, Craig A. “Beyond Political Mainstreaming: Reflections on National Lesbian and Gay Organizations and the Grassroots.” *The Politics of Gay Rights*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

<sup>225</sup> Rimmerman, Craig A. “Beyond Political Mainstreaming: Reflections on National Lesbian and Gay Organizations and the Grassroots.” *The Politics of Gay Rights*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. Page 64.

<sup>226</sup> Rimmerman, Craig A. “Beyond Political Mainstreaming: Reflections on National Lesbian and Gay Organizations and the Grassroots.” *The Politics of Gay Rights*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. Page 63.

on the ground, listening to the kind of thinkers and visionaries who were writing about LGBT freedom.<sup>227</sup>

Furthermore, D’Emilio recalls that both Vaid and Sue Hyde believed that although NGLTF had spent most of the 1980s focusing on federal level work, that “we [the LGBT/queer movement] were never going to win until we got stronger in the states. We were never going to get a federal gay rights bill...until we had a critical mass of states that had enacted non-discrimination policies—the Feds were going to follow, not lead.”<sup>228</sup>

Nonetheless, what grassroots connections NGLTF does cultivate are still indicative of the organization’s add-on approach to progressive issues. While most staff since the mid 1980s appear to have a dedication to grassroots activism, it is this wide-felt individual commitment that served to sustain this work. As a result, even what connections happen involve NGLTF staff, positioned as experts, providing resources and information to activists across the USA. Furthermore, NGLTF has relied on its membership base both for financial support and legislative connections, so has needed to maintain some connection to these people so as not to lose that doubly valuable resource. Even in the work of connecting individuals to federal legislators, NGLTF has advised people on appropriate language and framing of one’s story or political support, rather than engaging with them on an individual basis about what sort of strategies or tactics they see as most useful or relying on local activists’ knowledge base. Granted, NGLTF is noted for supporting a wide variety of actions, but particularly when addressing legislators and others within the federal government, NGLTF has consistently taken the position that less mainstream strategies deployed

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<sup>227</sup> John D’Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

such as street demonstrations should be done without any clear connection to NGLTF as an organization.

NGLTF's most widely recognized or publicly and sustainably demonstrated commitment to grassroots activism is their annual Creating Change conference. Creating Change grew out of Hyde and Vaid's belief that progress would not happen at the federal level until the foundation had been laid at the state level. They intended it to be an opportunity for grassroots activists to meet and share skills with one another. Held annually at different locations around the USA since 1988, it removed NGLTF staff as middlemen and allowed activists and organizers working on similar or related projects to connect with each other directly, as well as to gain perspective on what other work was being done both in and far outside their locality. That said, the conference is a small part of NGLTF's budget, but made more affordable to the organization through the expectation that the local organizing committee obtain donations and volunteer their time and energy in a wide (and time-consuming) variety of ways. Every Creating Change conference for over a decade has had a host committee of 10 to 20 core people who commit to doing volunteer work before and during the conference in that year's location. The Creating Change coordinator works to support them, and certainly many skills learned and networks built are intended for later use around local organizing initiatives. Yet, organizing a conference for many out-of-towners is significantly different than organizing other political initiatives, so a limited number of the skills and networking are transferable to other activist work. However unintentionally, having the conference be largely organized by a local volunteer base means that, except for the conference director, NGLTF staff

actually get to continue to avoid direct communication activists across the country except when those activists contact them for their advice/expertise.

Creating Change has also contributed to NGLTF's reputation as a progressive LGBT organization because of the support participants and keynotes speakers have long shown for a wide variety of social justice issues. The plenary for the first Creating Change included Suzanne Pharr, a white lesbian who is a well-known activist around domestic violence and anti-racism and theorist about the connections between homophobia and sexism. Vaid said, "from the beginning, that the Creating Change consciousness was very much a social justice movement, social justice consciousness."<sup>229</sup>

By the early 1990s NGLTF faced a small group of persistent and widely published people vocal in their opposition to the leftist views demonstrated by participants and speakers at Creating Change. The opposition arose from the disconnect that existed most notably in the early to mid 1990s between NGLTF staff's progressive backgrounds and personal beliefs and the more moderate/neoliberal perspectives of the newly out generation of the early 1990s. For example, at the 1993 Creating Change, Vaid recalls:

a handful of participants argued that the pending vote in Congress on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was something the gay and lesbian movement should be concerned about and should oppose. The issue was raised first at a preconference workshop, then at the opening plenary speech given by the Southern activist and author Mab Segrest... Several people denounced the organizers of the conference for allowing such critiques in the first place! The substantive arguments offered by the NAFTA opponents were never really debated; instead, the focus was on the fact that the issue had been raised at all. Conservatives denounced the progressives who had brought it up and accused them of diverting the movement from its real focus on gay rights and AIDS. After the fact, the gay and lesbian media

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<sup>229</sup> John D'Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

reported the story as if the NAFTA issue had taken over the conference. Conservative columnists used the fact of the NAFTA discussion at the conference to show how ‘out of touch’ NGLTF was, as if the organization was directly responsible for the views of each participant.<sup>230</sup>

Yet even while NGLTF received criticism for conference participants’ views, rather than for official organizational stances or even staff beliefs, Vaid recognized that during the time she had worked there from the mid 1980s to mid 1990s, NGLTF had rarely considered the “class and political biases that inform our agenda.”<sup>231</sup> She also reported that some of NGLTF’s financial hardships were “attributed to its progressivism”<sup>232</sup> by the larger community throughout the 1990s, although she did not appear convinced that was the actual cause of NGLTF’s financial difficulties. While *Creating Change* is an important opportunity both for NGLTF staff and activists not affiliated with the Task Force, it is one that NGLTF staff have far too often missed or failed to take advantage of primarily because they are expected to act as experts rather than to gain significant amounts of information from activists they do not regularly interact with.

### **Inclusion of Women and a Feminist Analysis**

NGLTF’s commitment to some social justice issues, particularly issues of sex—which, although discussed in terms of gender parity, was only ever focused on the comparative numbers of men and women until the late 1990s, when transgender people were finally included—was first made widely visible to the public with the

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<sup>230</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 257-258.

<sup>231</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 258.

<sup>232</sup> John D’Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

addition of the word “Lesbian” to the organization’s name in 1985. Around that time, in the mid-1980s, board members and staff began to look more closely at “gender parity” as expressed by power exerted rather than just the number of seats filled by women, as well as recognizing that issues of race needed to be addressed very badly as well. After a great deal of internal debate on these issues and who or what type of person could possibly be an “effective national leader for the organization”<sup>233</sup> in the eyes of board members, the staff and board gradually began to support staff efforts to incorporate concepts of anti-racism, feminism, and economic justice in NGLTF programs in addition to recognizing that is neither representative nor appropriate to have a national organization consistently or exclusively led by white people, and particularly white men. John D’Emilio said that “Urvashi [Vaid] becoming executive director kind of was a tipping point in that it didn’t erase continuing conflict between men and women but from that point on, you sort of knew that organizationally, a commitment to fighting sexism and to gender equity was going to be the [*modus operandi*] of the organization. And in terms of staff and leadership on staff, that’s absolutely what has been true.”<sup>234</sup>

However, D’Emilio also acknowledged, in direct contradiction to that statement, that, “one would be hard pressed beyond that to look at the issues that NGLTF worked on and say, ‘ah...strong feminist leadership and the presence of significant number of women had redirected the organization in terms of the issues

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<sup>233</sup> Rimmerman, Craig A. “Beyond Political Mainstreaming: Reflections on National Lesbian and Gay Organizations and the Grassroots.” *The Politics of Gay Rights*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. Page 63.

<sup>234</sup> John D’Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

that it's interested in."<sup>235</sup> As a result, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, NGLTF's projects that most impacted women were the Military Freedom Project and the Families Project, both very related to the sodomy law repeal work of the Privacy Project. While the Campus Organizing Project, anti-violence work, and employment non-discrimination advocacy also affected women, most of NGLTF's energies were focused on HIV/AIDS work and sodomy law repeal, both of which heavily emphasized gay men and were assumed to be primarily about protecting gay men. This is part of a larger trend throughout the LGBT/queer movement (and common in other social movements) in which the issues put on the agenda are increasingly made to reflect the needs and desires of those most privileged within the community.

The Military Freedom Project is a good example of how agenda items become white and male-dominated. In 1988, Sue Hyde, then director of NGLTF's Privacy Project, co-founded the Military Freedom Project as a coalition of national lesbian/gay and feminist organizations to organize first in response to reports from women at the Parris Island Marine Corps Recruit Training Depot. There were multiple reports coming from Parris Island about a "witch hunt" for lesbian recruits, a fairly common occurrence in the US armed forces. In the Parris Island incident, "at least two lesbians were tried, convicted, and incarcerated simply for being lesbian, and several others were discharged outright."<sup>236</sup> This began as a subset of the Privacy Project because of the severity and frequent enforcement of the military sodomy laws. Even though both Sue Hyde and Urvashi Vaid, the founders of the project, were "two

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<sup>235</sup> John D'Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

<sup>236</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 155.



[self-described] anti-war peaceniks,”<sup>237</sup> once they learned of “the persecution of mostly poor, mostly working class people who are in the armed forces who were being just pounded”<sup>238</sup> by enforcement of the military anti-sodomy law, they recognized the importance of taking on this battle. They maintained a fundamental opposition to the military institution, but realized the military anti-sodomy law was actually the most frequently and harshly enforced of any existing anti-sodomy laws in the USA.<sup>239</sup> They also learned through letters from lesbians who were serving out sodomy sentences and seeking NGLTF’s assistance and from coalition partners about the rampant sexual harassment of women in the service, which furthered their personal desire to take on the issues of sexism and homophobia in the US military. Vaid recalls “all the founders of the MFP had politics that today would be characterized as radical feminist or leftist. Each of us, if polled, would have fallen on the antiwar, military-cutback side of the ideological spectrum. Yet long before flag-waving gay Republicans began to push the issue, this group of radical lesbians had identified military reform as a high-priority for the movement.”<sup>240</sup>

That lesbians were erased from the discourse of the initial Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell hearings is indicative of how what Vaid calls “the pervasive sexism of our movement culture,”<sup>241</sup> which plays such an influential role in determining who is present in the lesbian and gay media, and what histories are represented. Reality

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<sup>237</sup> Rimmerman, Craig A. “Beyond Political Mainstreaming: Reflections on National Lesbian and Gay Organizations and the Grassroots.” *The Politics of Gay Rights*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. Page 63.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>240</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 155-156.

<sup>241</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 157.

remains that, “In a largely male-funded and male-dominated national gay and lesbian movement, until men get involved, an issue is deemed not to affect the community as a whole.”<sup>242</sup> Vaid notes that, with the issues of military policy towards lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in service,

It was not until 1992, when rich gay men got behind issue of the military ban repeal (perhaps because they discovered that the issue had political saliency), that the gay press and the straight media began to cover the issue as a movementwide priority. Notably, in 1993, at the height of the public argument, the experience of lesbians in the military became nearly invisible. The main focus of controversy and attention became the morale of straight men following the induction of gay and bisexual men.<sup>243</sup>

NGLTF’s work advocating for lesbian recruits and work in opposing the practice of ‘lesbian-baiting’ in general and in particular to enable sexual harassment directed against all women<sup>244</sup> was largely overlooked even by the lesbian and gay media because it was about women.

The other NGLTF project focused on issues that affected lesbians more than gay men was the Family Project. The Family Project was also in existence in the late 1980s and early 1990s (while Vaid was executive director) and run by staff member Ivy Young, who as an African American was also one of NGLTF’s first staff members of color after Vaid had joined the staff. D’Emilio recalls that “family issues were barely percolating at that point... at that point, family was not primarily defined in terms of marriage, it was much more defined in terms of parenting”, and women

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<sup>242</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 157.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> The military anti-sodomy law enabled sexual harassment against all women in the armed forces because any woman who objected to and/or reported sexual harassment could then be accused on lesbianism and as a result dishonorably discharged without any attention paid to the initial charge of sexual harassment. It also made lesbians particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment because they were less likely to be able to offer evidence of their heterosexuality if they were accused of either lesbianism or engaging in same-sex sexual acts.

were assumed to be the primary caregivers. As a result, the Family Project focused primarily on supporting lesbian mothers maintain or regain custody of their children when that was questioned or lost because of their lesbianism. Sometimes this also worked in connection to sodomy laws, because anti-sodomy laws were frequently used against women to keep custody away from lesbian or bisexual mothers. Other women's or feminist issues, including ERA and abortion/reproductive rights "was hotly debated by gay men opposed to 'diluting' the movement with nongay issues."<sup>245</sup> Resulting attention to the connections between control over one's own body, sodomy laws, or the medical pathologizing of transsexual and transgender people, or between anti-discrimination laws protecting women as opposed to gay people (including lesbians), as well as support for such related issues, has been intermittent.

### **Race and Class Analysis**

The AIDS epidemic was a particularly complicated issue for mainstream lesbian and gay rights organizations to take on. On one hand, AIDS was initially understood as primarily affecting gay men (and most visibly white middle and upper class gay men), which was sufficient reason to justify that it be considered a "gay issue"—because the people most visibly affected included people that lesbian and gay organizations had been highlighting as the privileged face of the lesbian and gay community. Yet because both social and their own personal homophobia made politicians and activists alike assume that addressing issues primarily associated with homosexuals would be political suicide, and because AIDS really did not affect

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<sup>245</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 293.

exclusively gay men, predominantly white gay male activists decided it was strategically best to disassociate AIDS advocacy from lesbian and gay rights or organizations. Yet, AIDS also severely impacted communities of color, straight and queer alike.

Since the 1980s, Vaid said, “gay organizations were being asked to serve white, black, Latino[/a], and Asian, gay, straight, and bisexual, working-class, middle-class, and ruling-class men and women [by the people themselves, but] the movement was poorly equipped to deal with this influx of new energy and different kinds of people.”<sup>246</sup> This is unfortunately not surprisingly given the fact that organizations and service providers dominated by very privileged people tend to be ill-equipped to respond to the specific concerns and issues of marginalized groups. Thus, people of color seeking AIDS health services or information in the early to mid 1980s frequently found the “best” lesbian and gay focused organizations to lack culturally specific or sensitive services and information while the “worst” organizations were overtly and openly racist and classist. As a result, people of color began to found AIDS service organizations that did provide competent services. But while most activists agree that

there is little question that AIDS organizations for people of color have expanded the reach of AIDS education and prevention...[most also agree] they have not transformed the racial or class politics of mainstream AIDS organizations. In this sense, the failure of the mainstream gay and white-dominated AIDS movements to take up systemic reform must be also seen as a failure to address racism and sexism.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 89.

<sup>247</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 90.

This failure to follow through on pursuing systemic reform did not mean that activists lacked an analysis of the need for a systemic response. As noted earlier, Vaid recalls that Jeff Levi, in his work lobbying around HIV/AIDS, was well aware of “how the epidemic implicated our whole health care system, and how....it was racism, and it was class, and it was the whole kind of health care system, and its inadequacy at dealing with people in crisis, that was being called up.”<sup>248</sup> Nonetheless, seeking small stop-gap reforms that the more readily achievable than systemic change often won out with more and more people getting sick and dying every day.

That mainstream gay and lesbian activists avoided directly engaging in with the intersections of homophobia and racism has in many ways allowed the US government to ignore how these interactions directly affect and are affected by the AIDS epidemic. Activists Ben Schatz and Eric Rofes created the term ‘degaying’ to describe the strategic move of “removing the stigma of homosexuality from the stigma of AIDS in order to win the access and attention we needed. In short, homophobia required gay people, nationwide, to create an AIDS-specific movement.”<sup>249</sup> This move is now acknowledged as consciously made by lesbian and gay leaders, including former NGLTF lobbyist and executive director Jeff Levi. This choice meant that NGLTF and other organizations “degayed” AIDS;

when [they] put forward nongay public health officials as [their]spokespersons, and when [they] pressed forward on AIDS-specific issues while avoiding gay and lesbian rights issues. [They] believed gay people did not carry the same moral authority or influence as public health officials, so [they] asked the latter to speak for [the community]...in our

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<sup>248</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

<sup>249</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 75.

attempt to get a governmental response to AIDS, [they] employed a strategy that left the gay movement at the mercy of the homophobic, sex-phobic, and racist government.<sup>250</sup>

Scholar Patrick Moore, who has written about the history of radical gay male sexuality in the USA in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, posits that “Self-policing in marginalized communities indicates an internalized self-hatred that manifests itself in a paranoia that the dominant culture is constantly watching, waiting for breaches of the carefully constructed responsibility.”<sup>251</sup> In the instance of lesbian and gay activists agreeing upon de-gaying as a strategy to move AIDS issues forward, this applies because this “self-policing to maintain respectability... is an attempt to create a revisionist culture that is more palatable to the larger world than the authentic culture that reflects the messiness of deep history.”<sup>252</sup> It is also important to remember that while mainstream tactics like lobbying and presentation sometimes achieved the small reforms they sought, more radical tactics like street demonstrations have also sometimes achieved the ends they sought, most notably around government support for HIV/AIDS and approval or medication for HIV positive people. While a wide range of activist strategies and tactics are ultimately most successful, there is not solid evidence that shows the de-gaying strategy worked better than any other strategy that may have been chosen. It is also important to acknowledge that even as activists made decisions that seemed best at the time, they were greatly affected by the social context in which they lived, including dealing with regular external and internalized

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<sup>250</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 75.

<sup>251</sup> Moore, Patrick. *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. Page 156.

<sup>252</sup> Moore, Patrick. *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. Page 157.

homophobia and other systems of oppression, and so made assumptions about the tactics that would be most effective.

While the de-gaying strategy was indeed successful in getting the federal government to acknowledge AIDS as a problem and begin acting on it, it also reaffirmed the importance of whiteness and assimilative strategies to the national lesbian and gay rights agenda. Bérubé writes, “for those few who act like, look like, and identify with the white men who still run our nation’s major institutions, for those few who can meet with them, talk to them, and be heard by them as peers, the ability to draw on the enormous power of a shared but unacknowledged whiteness”<sup>253</sup> must seem like an enormous protection against discrimination and appear to be the same as being heard for the issues alone. Vaid recalls;

With our frequent pleas to the government to spend funds for AIDS because straights can get ill too, we promoted the homophobic subtext that AIDS would not be a important if only gay and bisexual people were susceptible. Further, when we argued that AIDS affected everyone, not just gay people, we focused attention on sexual acts, not on sexual identities. Yet our life-saving focus on such acts (anal sex and fellatio, in particular) reinforced in the public’s mind the essence of our stigmatization—sexual behavior.<sup>254</sup>

Focusing on lesbian and gay identities rather than sexual behaviors was also applied as a strategy for coalition building. Coalition building with other marginalized identity groups required a firm assertion of lesbian and gay identities as valid categories for protection. While white lesbian and gay activists have long drawn analogies between homophobia and racism—often in ways which overlook the experiences of lesbian and gay people of color—straight-dominated people of color

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<sup>253</sup> Bérubé, Allan. “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays.” from Rasmussen, Birgit Brander, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray, eds. *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. pp. 234-265. Page 242.

<sup>254</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 75.

organizations have frequently objected either out of valid critiques of the historical differences between the treatment of people of color versus white LGBT people and less frequently out of homophobia or an unwillingness to support equal rights work aimed to protect people on the basis of sexual orientation (and to a lesser extent, gender identity and expression). A prime example of this is that, even after refusing to let any lesbian and gay political advocacy organization become a member of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, it was fifteen years after an LGBT group gained membership that the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights agreed to endorse federal non-discrimination legislation for people regardless of sexual orientation.<sup>255</sup>

Interestingly, NGLTF's "Position Paper on the Persian Gulf War" attributed a great deal more to the response to the AIDS epidemic than was perhaps warranted, and certainly made claims that NGLTF could not necessarily entirely back up with their organizational evidence. The position paper, dated January 30, 1991, notes,

During the past decade, the AIDS health crisis has done a great deal to broaden what we think of as gay and lesbian concerns. Through AIDS, we have addressed issues ranging from the development of drugs to the delivery of health services; from the structure of research in this country to the care of our own homeless. AIDS has shown us that we are not immune from the effects of institutionalized racism—gay and bisexual men and women of color with AIDS and HIV remain the most under-served by current AIDS policy. We have learned we are not isolated from the problems of the poor. We have learned that our lawmakers are willing to play politics as usual while our friends, lovers, colleagues and family members suffer and die. The last ten years of our history have built a new gay and lesbian politics—a politics of coalition, not isolation; a politics of confidence, not apology; a politics that celebrates the difference we represent as a

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<sup>255</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 203.



gay people and does not offer assimilation as the quid pro quo for our freedom.<sup>256</sup>

The position statement then continues to detail the Task Force's opposition to the war, believing it appropriate to do so precisely "because we believe the broader social and political context profoundly affects our lives and aspirations as lesbians and gay men."<sup>257</sup> Citing how the gay movement has been largely dominated by white, middle class gay men, the document notes previous support demonstrated by NGLTF and other gay and lesbian organizations for reproductive rights, freedom of choice, anti-apartheid work in South Africa, and other civil rights causes that are not explicitly for or about gay and lesbian people. It also acknowledges that the gay movement as it exists in the United States "has begun to learn slowly and painfully that it cannot succeed unless it speaks to all the members of the gay and lesbian community."<sup>258</sup> NGLTF claims to have taken a stand on the war "for the same reason we have taken a position on a range of issues that are not specifically 'gay rights' issues—in order to respond to the needs of the entire lesbian and gay community so we can build a movement that includes us all."<sup>259</sup>

To give NGLTF the credit it deserves, former staff and board member John D'Emilio does recall that by the early to mid 1990s, NGLTF was clearly engaging

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<sup>256</sup> NGLTF Position Paper on the Persian Gulf War, 30 January 1991 (Box 2, folder 34), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001). Page 2.

<sup>257</sup> National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Mission Statement, 1991 (Box 1, Folder 4), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.

<sup>258</sup> NGLTF Position Paper on the Persian Gulf War, 30 January 1991 (Box 2, folder 34), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001). Page 4.

<sup>259</sup> NGLTF Position Paper on the Persian Gulf War, 30 January 1991 (Box 2, folder 34), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records, #7301. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Microfilm, 2001). Page 4.

with the LGBT/queer movement's "natural allies and partners."<sup>260</sup> In this case, Black civil rights activists and other people of color working against racism and for civil rights were invited to the table:

It also started to show very clearly at Creating Change, I don't remember which year, but it was somewhere around this time...that we started having the pre-conference institutes, and the core of those in their current incarnations were the People of Color Institute and the Whites Addressing Racism Institute...In terms of national gay organizing, that was completely<sup>261</sup> innovative. I can't believe that any others were doing stuff like that. It was hard internally, you were pushing against things.<sup>262</sup>

In 1995 NGLTF convened its first Progressive People of Color Grassroots Organizers Summit, and in 2000 began the Racial and Economic Justice Program, most clearly manifested in the projects of the Policy Institute. Additionally, all Creating Change conferences since 2002 have had the theme of, "Building an Anti-Racist Movement: Working for Social and Economic Justice," although speakers, workshop topics, and award recipients have made the importance of anti-racist and social and economic justice work to NGLTF clear since Creating Change first took place in 1988.

According to Sean Cahill, the Racial and Economic Justice Initiative meant that the Policy Institute produced a series of papers in the late 1990s and early 2000s called "linkages," that were in response to;

the way the extreme right in the United States was attacking not only the queer community, but other communities as well. So we released short analyses of issues like welfare reform, affirmative action, and immigration restriction, drawing connections between the needs and aspirations of our sexuality-based communities and those of racial, ethnic, and economically marginalized groups.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> John D'Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

<sup>261</sup> D'Emilio, John. "What Does Gay Liberation Have to Do with the War on Bosnia?" pp. 165-173. (Given as keynote address at conference in Detroit, Michigan, February 1996), from D'Emilio, John. *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. Page 165-166.

<sup>262</sup> John D'Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

<sup>263</sup> Sean Cahill, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 19 September 2005

These papers, like other work that the Policy Institute has produced that looks at intersectional identities and/or oppressions, are all useful and even commendable. However, given the broader organizational picture and agenda, it is not anywhere near enough to make the argument that NGLTF is committed to progressive, multi-issue organizing with the goal of liberation as an organization. Even though some staff have at times been personally committed to such work, how organizational resources have been allocated simply does not back this up. Urvashi Vaid, involved with NGLTF since the early 1980s first as a board member and then staff member, notes that although NGLTF has been criticized for not being progressive enough, or anti-racist enough, or committed to social justice “enough”—especially in the 1980s—not many people she has encountered have acknowledged the homophobia present in other progressive movements. She notes that NGLTF, even when wanting to loudly support other progressive issues and movements, was not always welcomed, and that there “are examples of places where we tried to get in and had to fight like hell to do it”, as NGLTF did with some housing demonstrations and the Rodney King coalition, even up into the early 1990s.<sup>264</sup>

NGLTF has consistently received criticism from privileged members of the lesbian and gay community for its coalition work around issues not considered “gay” issues and its recent Racial and Economic Justice Initiatives. Vaid remembered;

resistance to tackling racism and sexism comes from gay legitimizationists who believe that broadening the movement’s scope to encompass race and gender will involve it in issues that are not ‘our issues.’ ...For example, when NGLTF lobbied for the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1991, a bill that reversed the effect of several Supreme Court decisions stripping the federal government’s civil rights enforcement powers, I received phone calls from

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<sup>264</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

members questioning the wisdom of our efforts on nongay issues. These (all white) members complained that they supported NGLTF to work on gay rights, not black civil rights and women's rights. These were not 'our' issues, but were more appropriate for the NAACP or NOW.<sup>265</sup>

The white gay male demographic who most often voices this sort of criticism regularly see the pure hypocrisy of repeatedly asking and expecting non-LGBT-specific people of color organizations to support lesbian and gay civil rights. Because their own experience is different, they also overlook how LGBT/queer people of color are affected by these issues, so to them race issues *are* "our issues."

Vaid also believes that the fact that middle and upper class people have been most visibly active in the LGBT/queer movement has heavily impacted how NGLTF has dealt with economic status/socioeconomic class. And for many reasons,

middle-class and wealthy gay people are far more likely to be visible than are working-class and poor queers. Working-class and poor gay people are not the population to whom the gay and lesbian movement's events, newspapers, magazines, enterprises, and efforts at political mobilization are aimed. Middle-class academicians, middle-class students, business owners, and professionals of every type constitute the funding base for the movement. These middle-class queer folk are the ones who attend gay and lesbian community dinners, cocktail parties, conferences, who take vacation in queer resorts, who subscribe to papers, who patronize the arts, buy expensive Broadway tickets, sport trendy clothes, dine out at restaurants, and drive pricey cars. To the extent that heterosexist bias pervades nongay agencies serving poor people or the homeless, our ability to know how many of the clients of these agencies are actually queer is hampered.<sup>266</sup>

These same middle and upper class lesbian and gay people are also the first to experience greater acceptance and other benefits as the movement makes progress in advancing the idea that lesbian and gay people are not harmful and are actually quite

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<sup>265</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 202-203.

<sup>266</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 256.

“normal.”<sup>267</sup> This also impacts who national LGBT/queer organizations like NGLTF choose as their ideal representative image. Such representatives have generally been chosen with as few marginalized identities as possible, so as to be as relatable as possible to the imagined all-American man/woman (who is white and middle to upper class and gender conforming, though assumedly straight).

So even while limited efforts have been made to improve the accessibility of events and membership through sliding scale fees, scholarships, and sponsorships, this has failed to translate into a poor, working class, or lower class perspective being taken into account when the national LGBT agenda is considered. This cycles back into the broader community, leaving many able to firmly believe that welfare and non-AIDS-related social services are not LGBT/queer issues. Vaid also adds, “When people bring a progressive or even an alternative economic analysis to queer political gatherings, they are soundly trashed. On the other hand, when a conservative economic analysis or agenda is promoted, it is rarely questioned, much less attacked.”<sup>268</sup>

John D’Emilio describes most of NGLTF’s staff members’ foundational understanding of different issues and willingness to engage with different perspectives as what has most helped NGLTF define itself as a progressive organization. He notes, “it’s about how you organize and your worldview, not necessarily what you organize on... [NGLTF] probably end[s] up spending more time on GLBT issues than a lot of GLBT organizations... But they—okay, I think it’s

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<sup>267</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 16.

<sup>268</sup> Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Page 257.

about the framing of the issues, how you frame the issues, rather than what's particularly worked on."<sup>269</sup> So while NGLTF has always focused its resources and energies on initiatives that benefit lesbian and gay people, it has been able to look at "non-gay" issues through a queer lens to highlight the impact of various issues on LGBT/queer people.

## **Conclusion**

While NGLTF has done admirable work engaging with feminist analysis and the inclusion of lesbians, grassroots activists, and issues of racial and economic justice at different times, it has all been very staff initiated and driven. While the mission statement and some staff statements have demonstrated organizational support for such initiatives, the actual initiatives have always fit into an existing directive or program. And none of these programs have been primarily created to advance multi-issue organizing or intersectional politics, but have been assumed to fit into a larger movement for a vague idea of social justice. Additionally, even when staff have understood the importance of coalition work or addressing intersecting oppressions, that recognition has inconsistently affected both what work NGLTF has taken on and how it has approached those chosen projects.

This is significant because recognizing the limits of NGLTF's accomplishments and progressivism allow activists to both appreciate what has been done and see what still needs to be done both in NGLTF and in similar organizations. If individual staff members can only do so much scattered progressive work within an organization using predominantly mainstream tactics and strategies, then the next step

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<sup>269</sup> John D'Emilio, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 23 September 2005.

would be to reassess organizational priorities (and how those fit within larger LGBT/queer and social justice movements), reallocate organizational resources in a way that will facilitate and support those priorities, and restructure accordingly in terms of mission, programs, and division of power. This might involve conversations with a wide and diverse range of local, state, and national activists engaged in multi-issue organizing and committed to addressing queer issues to see what alternative priorities might be, and then returning to the board of directors to see if such new priorities and restructuring still made sense within NGLTF's stated commitments and vision.

If NGLTF wanted to make a more meaningful commitment to addressing intersecting oppressions and to engaging in multi-issue organizing, it would need to undertake a significant reassessment of movement needs, reallocation of resources, and internal restructuring. And if it did not decide to make that commitment, it should acknowledge more truthfully the scattered way in which it has accomplished the impressive work that it has done. When commitment to multiple issues is tenuous and inconsistent, there is a fine line between acknowledging and accepting praise for valuable work that has been done and highlighting the good (but small amount of) work that has been done in an effort to make it seem farther-reaching than it actually is. It seems that NGLTF frequently goes back and forth on either side of that line, so even reconsidering how they address the marketing of what they accomplish and how what they accomplish fits into what their vision is would be a solid start.

## Conclusion

NGLTF has consistently and strategically chosen when and how to speak about its political vision. Former NGLTF lobbyist Peri Jude Radecic agrees that:

...in terms of strategy, again, I believe...in queer crowds, we spoke more freely about sexual liberation as part of our civil rights agenda—we were repealing sodomy laws not just because they were offensive, but because it was going to lead to some sexual liberation. But when we were pushing legislative issues, you gotta gear your message to your audience.<sup>270</sup>

Current director of NGLTF's Policy Institute Sean Cahill, also in agreement about the importance of strategic use of language and rhetoric, states, "the reality is that we use different language in different contexts, we might use a more liberationist approach in certain contexts, and downplay that for another context. That's just sort of acknowledging political realities."<sup>271</sup> NGLTF staff members have always taken what is practical and seems likely to be most effective into mind when making organizational decisions. Urvashi Vaid believes:

More people today are willing to understand the multi-issue nature of civil rights work...fifteen or twenty years ago...only people who were progressive, who had progressive politics first, kind of understood the link between civil rights and gay rights. But today, in part because the Right Wing makes it so we have a common enemy, people see the linkage between the struggles. And also, so what's changed is the common enemy being more visible and attacking all these elements of our society, and so a common cause amongst those opposing that common enemy...I feel like the grassroots of the gay movement is multi-issue and progressive, because the groups that are on the ground...have been working within coalitions [with non-gay-focused progressive organizations] for years at the state level.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Peri Jude Radecic, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 13 September 2005.

<sup>271</sup> Sean Cahill, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 19 September 2005

<sup>272</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.



The staff who have actually engaged with other activists at the grassroots level, especially before joining the Task Force staff, have been those firmly committed to progressive, multi-issue organizing practices in their work at NGLTF. Urvashi Vaid notes; “it’s a staff-driven organization, and historically has been, from its founding, because it was founded by activists who had the passion. It probably still is...I definitely think it’s the staff taking the lead on that.”<sup>273</sup> The staff, rather than the board of directors, most influenced the direction NGLTF took in terms of addressing sexual liberation at times, and more recently increasing support for recognizing other systems of oppression at work beyond homophobia/heterosexism. Stemming from their individual identities, life experiences, and political affiliations, most staff very much supported the right to not have to conform to a heterosexualized, mainstream ideal, the right to not downplay or normalize their sexual interests, and the right to be upfront about how oppressive—racist, sexist, classist, etc—they thought specific institutions—state or federal government, NGLTF, other organizations—could be. Even by the early 1990s, when NGLTF’s Board of Directors did more consistently provide support for the staff’s progressive initiatives and projects, it was still NGLTF employees who took the lead on recognizing and making apparent the links between civil rights and social equality for LGBT/queer people, sexual liberation or sexual freedom, and civil rights and social equality for all oppressed peoples, and who worked most with grassroots activists on these issues.

NGLTF’s early history did not emerge from a vacuum, but rather arose intentionally in response to existing gay liberation groups based on the foundation laid by homophile organizations. Many of the ideas and strategies also intentionally

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<sup>273</sup> Urvashi Vaid, interview by author, digital recording over the phone, 10 October 2005.

imitated moves made (and taking into account lessons learned) by the Black civil rights movement and women's movement. The role NGLTF filled in the larger gay and lesbian liberation and rights movements of the time was determined by NGLTF's founders, a group of fairly mainstream and privileged gay and lesbian activists not interested in the more-common consciousness-raising groups which already existed in 1973. The result was an organization concentrated on influencing issues and policies with national scope, whether governmental or not. As one of the first two national gay and lesbian advocacy organizations founded in the USA, it set the initial versions of the gay national agenda from this location, which was in turn reflected in issues made the agenda.

The issues NGLTF prioritized in the early years repeatedly privileged whiteness both through who was represented in advocating for the issues and the issues themselves. The issues themselves tended to be broad based enough to benefit the entire LGBT/queer community in some way, but failed to consider how they might uniquely affect marginalized sections within the LGBT/queer community. The concerns of marginalized sections of the LGBT/queer community were also never taken into account when NGLTF set its priorities or took on new projects. This established a precedent that the LGBT/queer community would maintain the invisible privilege of whiteness that was true throughout U.S. society. Organizations including NGLTF repeatedly chose to represent the LGBT/queer community as being composed primarily of white, middle to upper class gay people. This was further reinforced because the lesbian and gay activists who worked in national, mostly mainstream, LGBT/queer advocacy organizations tended to think first of "gay" issues

which benefited what they saw as the most people. Yet because of how white privilege functions to simultaneously make whiteness invisible and privilege white people, when these activists were considering the “most people” of the community, they tended to think first of the relatively gender conforming, white, class-privileged gay men and lesbians who were the majority of their membership and the representatives their organizations were putting forth. Therefore, the issues NGLTF chose to focus on in the 1970s created the foundation for what has been the visible national lesbian and gay agenda through to the 1990s, which has been a very mainstream, white dominated, middle and upper class lesbian and gay agenda.

Because the major issues negatively affecting the entire lesbian and gay community in the late 1980s were anti-sodomy laws in the states they existed after the 1986 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Bowers v. Hardwick* and the AIDS epidemic, it was not possible to present a completely desexualized representation of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community. Such a representation would have felt untrue to queer and straight people alike. However, as a civil rights organization, NGLTF mostly wanted to avoid sexual liberation politics and rhetoric, since that might make people think their goals were too radical and therefore not worth supporting. Yet the historical context meant that NGLTF needed to figure out some ways in which they could address sex acts explicitly to address the public health needs of HIV/AIDS education and prevention while still trying to disentangle lesbian and gay identities from hypersexuality and other negative connotations.

Again, NGLTF followed the pattern of both other LGBT organizations and broader U.S. society in its legislative strategies. The lesbian and gay people who were

made visible as spokespersons to white upper class male legislators were most often white and upper class themselves. Because most public representations of gay and lesbian political causes were also white, these representatives were able to focus exclusively on questions of sexual orientation and identity without regard to race. This left both their own whiteness and the whiteness of their political work unmarked racially. So while seemingly progressive because of dealing with the very taboo subject of same-sex desire and homosexuality, early lesbian and gay organizations served to shape and maintain the white dominated, middle and upper class, mainstream gay agenda which was and remains predominant within the USA. Specifically within NGLTF, this agenda has been maintained because each action around a progressive, multi-issue concern has been directed by staff members, rather than originating from directives made by the board of directors or executive director (or even coming from multiple staff working together intentionally).

While NGLTF was forced to explicitly address sexual behavior while addressing anti-sodomy laws and the AIDS epidemic, it nonetheless maintained a mainstream civil rights focus, only allowing individual staff members to initiate some connections to sexual liberation rhetoric within the more “in house” and safer realm of queer community work. NGLTF responded to the AIDS epidemic, organized around anti-sodomy law repeal, and reacted to the threats to National Endowment for the Arts funding as a result of some of Mapplethorpe and other artists’ work being publicized to legislators. This commitment to engaging with sexual liberation rhetoric has been defended as a necessity given the historical context of anti-sodomy laws and the AIDS epidemic, but as shown, this limited posture then feeds into and reinforces

the contemporary national white dominated, middle and upper class mainstream LGBT agenda.

In the late 1990s through to the early 2000s, NGLTF has committed itself to promoting grassroots organizing, gender equality (especially with women), and racial and economic justice. While the Task Force has been notably more progressive than its peer organizations, it has most frequently done this through add-ons to existing programs. It has not significantly restructured its allocation of resources or decision-making and agenda-setting processes in ways that would really result in sustained and consistent consideration of the wide variety of intersectional issues it claims to support and want to address.

NGLTF first began considering how to broaden its vision and issues by seeking to have gay and lesbian people of color and white lesbians participate in the board and serve on the staff. However, this often failed to happen to the amounts set by the by-laws, and when it did happen it often resulted in tokenization of those people. The organization began to shift towards being more progressive in the mid and late 1980s, when a number of activists were hired who came from progressive/radical backgrounds in doing a variety of activist work that was not gay-specific. These people included Urvashi Vaid, Sue Hyde, and Ivy Young. With these people on staff, the Task Force began to consider intersectional politics and how to support other civil rights struggles. Up until that point, NGLTF had seemed to expect that other civil rights organizations would support their struggle for lesbian and gay civil rights while failing to make a concerted effort to show NGLTF and the broader queer community were supporting their issues and initiatives, as well. Nonetheless, as

an organization that has always focused primarily on mainstream strategies and tactics, like lobbying legislators and other policy makers for explicit legal protections and consideration, much of NGLTF's progressive or radical work has been accomplished by individual staff members with personal commitments to this work, rather than as a result of encouragement or directives from either the board of directors or the executive director. I argue that although NGLTF has declared its commitment to addressing social justice issues, and particularly racial and economic justice, since the late 1980s, the good work in these areas has been undertaken as add-ons, rather than by implementing structural change or a significant reallocation of organizational resources. The impact of this approach without structural changes to accompany it has meant that organizational consideration for positioning their civil rights work within a larger framework of sexual freedom has been unsustainable and used primarily as a tactic to maintain NGLTF's constituent base rather than as a consistent approach.

Because NGLTF was created as a civil rights organization employing mainstream strategies to gain legislative support, they most often chose to "neutralize" the lesbian and gay identities of movement representatives by choosing not to have people with intersecting/multiple oppressed identities act as spokespeople. While that has been a strategically understandable decision because of their engagement with legislators, it means that the only way that NGLTF has been able to respond to critiques about how it has engaged with other progressive social movements and addressed organizational "isms" has been through an add-on approach, which has been intermittently initiated by individual staff members but

ultimately unsustainable, and continued to leave issues which primarily affect people of color and/or lower/working class people “invisible” to the LGBT/queer movement. This has maintained a very whitened image of the LGBT/queer community to the detriment of attention paid to queer people of color. It has also served to continue to make white and otherwise privileged queer people the people who are consistently prioritized when crafting the agendas for national LGBT/queer organizations. Because NGLTF has been such a leader in the LGBT/queer movement since the 1970s, it is important to recognize where it has room to improve, especially in accurately reflecting its own vision and claims. Many state-wide LGBT/queer organizations have used NGLTF as a model, and while it is a good one, NGLTF also has a unique opportunity to set a new example of what a (formerly entirely white and still white-led and dominated) organization might do to actually broaden its perspective on and participation in multi-issue organizing and intersectional politics. Even as commendable as the work that NGLTF has done is, that to truly set an example and live up to its own established vision, it would need to significantly reconsider restructuring and reallocating its resources.

What NGLTF might first consider doing as an alternative approach would be to carefully analyze and reconsider their own allocation of resources. This would mean specifically focusing on how they spend their money, breaking that down between the cost of tangible resources (supplies, transportation costs, resources), staff time (what tasks staff are spending time on), and money granted to other organizations (either locally-based or roundtables that they convene but do not run). There should be a clear analysis of what costs contribute to collaborative efforts or

address intersecting oppressions and marginalized identities, as well as of how the amount of support given to predominantly white, middle/upper class self-labeled lesbian and gay *or* LGBT organizations compares to the support given to organizations that primarily consist of and are focused on specifically addressing the needs of either LGBT/queer people, working and lower class LGBT/queer people, or transgender people. I recommend that unavoidable expenses, from office supplies and rent to fringe benefits for staff be either be separated out into an “overhead” section or that, if the breakdown of staff time seems fairly consistent across the board, that the same percentages of resource allocation be transferred to such costs because they are necessary for the rest of the work accomplished. How these costs breakdown and the extent to which that matches up with NGLTF’s expressed commitments and vision would then have to be considered by staff and board members alike. Only from there could possibilities for restructuring be discussed in a meaningful way that goes beyond ideas of assumed effectiveness.

NGLTF could also begin the process of more accurately marketing themselves by considering what work they receive greater attention for and what work they highlight as an organization. While obviously what various media outlets choose to highlight or focus on is largely out of their control, given what impact they have historically had on influencing the national LGBT agenda, they could put greater effort toward emphasizing the issues that are currently overlooked that greatly impact marginalized populations with the broader LGBT/queer community and the importance of supporting other social justice movements. They could also keep a closer watch on the amount of energy they expend on issues like same-sex marriage



with tend to receive a great deal of attention and a great deal of support from the LGBT community as compared to other issues which also greatly affect the LGBT community but fail to gather as much attention and lack broader community support. This could include seeing to what degree other organizations already focused on same-sex marriage and domestic partnership recognition could be supported in doing that work with less direct involvement from NGLTF, while at the same time focusing what work they do do on such topics in a way that actually looks at the intersections. To some degree NGLTF's Policy Institute attempted this around marriage by presenting arguments that same-sex marriage or domestic partnership recognition allowed lower and middle class LGBT/queer people access to the same protective rights that previously only upper class LGBT/queer people had the chance to access through a wide range of (very expensive) legal contracts. However, until recently NGLTF failed to acknowledge larger picture issues related to same-sex marriage and domestic partnership recognition around questions of why legally recognized couples would be allowed such tax benefits, opportunities for shared health insurance, hospital visitation rights, and joint custody rights when many people not coupled (or with relationships not able to be recognized, whether sexually-based or not) are not allowed such rights (but should often be able to have them). As discussed earlier, John D'Emilio observed that NGLTF has often tried to fill gaps in national LGBT/queer organizing. While he is right insomuch as NGLTF should try and maintain its core foci in order to avoid being scattered and ineffective as a result, such a desire to fill existing voids might also quite usefully be focused on bringing attention to the needs of marginalized populations within the broader LGBT/queer

community. This has already been done to a large degree, most notably around trans-inclusion within traditionally/historically lesbian and gay advocacy. It has also been done more recently with the Task Force's release of "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness,"<sup>274</sup> which has brought new attention to the very old problem and comparatively high rates of LGBT youth homelessness.

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<sup>274</sup> "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness." The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2007. <<http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/HomelessYouth.pdf>> Accessed 26 March 2007.

## Appendix

### **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**

Mission of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Foundation:

The mission of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is to build the political power of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community from the ground up. We do this by training activists, organizing broad-based campaigns to defeat anti-LGBT referenda and advance pro-LGBT legislation, and by building the organizational capacity of our movement. Our Policy Institute, the movement's premier think tank, provides research and policy analysis to support the struggle for complete equality and to counter right-wing lies. As part of a broader social justice movement, we work to create a nation that respects the diversity of human expression and identity and creates opportunity for all.

Mission of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Inc.:

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Inc. (NGLTF, Inc.), founded in 1973 and incorporated in 1974, works to build the grassroots political power of the LGBT community to win complete equality. We do this through direct and grassroots lobbying to defeat anti-LGBT ballot initiatives and legislation and pass pro-LGBT legislation and other measures. We also analyze and report on the positions of candidates for public office on issues of importance to the LGBT community. NGLTF, Inc., is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit corporation incorporated in New York. Contributions to NGLTF, Inc., are not tax-deductible.

From "About Us." The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2007. Accessed <[http://thetaskforce.org/about\\_us/mission\\_statements](http://thetaskforce.org/about_us/mission_statements)> 17 March 2007.

### **Lambda Legal**

Lambda Legal is a national organization committed to achieving full recognition of the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people and those with HIV through impact litigation, education and public policy work.

From "About Lambda Legal." Lambda Legal, 2007.

<<http://www.lambdalegal.org/about-us/>> Accessed 17 March 2007.

### **Human Rights Campaign**

The Human Rights Campaign is America's largest civil rights organization working to achieve gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender equality. By inspiring and engaging all Americans, HRC strives to end discrimination against GLBT citizens and realize a nation that achieves fundamental fairness and equality for all.

HRC seeks to improve the lives of GLBT Americans by advocating for equal rights and benefits in the workplace, ensuring families are treated equally under the law and increasing public support among all Americans through innovative advocacy,

education and outreach programs. HRC works to secure equal rights for GLBT individuals and families at the federal and state levels by lobbying elected officials, mobilizing grassroots supporters, educating Americans, investing strategically to elect fair-minded officials and partnering with other GLBT organizations.

From “About the Human Rights Campaign.” Human Rights Campaign, 2007. <[http://hrc.org/Template.cfm?Section=About\\_HRC](http://hrc.org/Template.cfm?Section=About_HRC)> Accessed 17 March 2007.

### **National Center for Lesbian Rights**

The National Center for Lesbian Rights is a national legal organization with headquarters in San Francisco and regional offices in Florida and Washington, DC. Through impact litigation, public policy advocacy, public education, collaboration with other social justice organizations and activists, and direct legal services, we advance the legal and human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people and their families across the United States.

From “FACT SHEET: Celebrating 30 Years of Legal Advocacy.” National Center for Lesbian Rights, 2007. <[http://nclrights.org/pdf/NCLR\\_FactSheet.pdf](http://nclrights.org/pdf/NCLR_FactSheet.pdf)> Accessed 17 March 2007.

### **The Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund**

The Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund provides strategic, technical and financial support to openly LGBT candidates and officials. It is the only national organization committed to increasing the number of openly LGBT public officials at all levels of government. Victory Fund support is acknowledged as the determinative factor in the successful election or appointment of endorsed LGBT candidates. The Victory Fund is the nation’s largest LGBT political action committee and one of the nation’s largest non-connected PACs.

From “About the Victory Fund.” Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund, 2007. <<http://www.victoryfund.org/index.php?src=gendocs&link=About%20Us%20-%20Fund&category=About%20Us&PHPSESSID=759590fa6ae8f63ffa24b554fb1f8b29>> Accessed 17 March 2007.

### **Log Cabin Republicans**

We stand for the proposition that all of us are created equal-worthy of the same rights to freedom, liberty, and equality.

The mission of the Log Cabin Republicans is to work within the Republican Party to advocate equal rights for all Americans, including gays and lesbians. Log Cabin's mission derives from our firm belief in the principles of limited government, individual liberty, individual responsibility, free markets and a strong national defense. We emphasize that these principles and the moral values on which they stand

are consistent with the pursuit of equal treatment under the law for gay and lesbian Americans.

The mission of the Log Cabin Republicans shall be advanced at the local, state, and federal level. Our organization's strength comes from our grassroots chapters all around the nation. Coordinating strategy with the national office, these chapters create a powerful force for transforming the Republican Party.

We are loyal Republicans working for change within the party. Through education and action, we demonstrate that gay and lesbian Republicans can, in a spirit of solidarity and integrity, contribute substantially to building and sustaining a majority Republican Party and a great nation.

This effort will help secure full equality for gays and lesbians. Plus, it will create a stronger, larger, and more unified GOP, leading to the election of more fair-minded Republican candidates to public office at all levels of government.

From "Mission Statement." Log Cabin Republicans, 2007.  
<<http://online.logcabin.org/about/mission.html>> Accessed 17 March 2007.