

# MOVERS & SHAKERS

**In conjunction with the VCLGR conference, four very different activists talk about organizing and creating change in our communities both locally and nationally.**

an interview with  
**Sarah Schulman**  
activist, academic, author

by David Gramling

Sarah and I interviewed at Calvi's ice cream shop on Main Street in Middlebury before she read from her latest novel *Rat Bohemia* as part of National Coming Out Week at Middlebury College. We sat at the table in the back, under the mooseheads and next to the flat-top Space Invaders game. With Maxine Wolfe, Sarah co-founded the Lesbian Avengers which grew to sixty chapters on four continents. She has written six novels and a book of essays and reports entitled: *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life during the Reagan/Bush Years*.

dg: You've spoken recently about the difficulties that people have in regarding gay and lesbian writers and artists as "American" writers and artists. The pressure on people to closet their work is intense. What has it been like to write novels like *Rat Bohemia* and *People in Trouble...* novels with primary lesbian protagonists?

ss: Well, I've been battling that all the time, and I've been making some headway, I have to say. Lets look at Toni Morrison. She's won a Nobel Prize. But when people think of American writers, do they name Toni Morrison? No, she's still considered a Black writer. It's this battle to become American, so that when people think of American literature they will think of you because they have overcome their biases and can now identify with a lesbian protagonist or a Black protagonist. And this is, in a way, the new frontier for gay people. Which is that we've changed a lot, but straight people haven't changed at all. And now were at a place where they have to change, because they're killing us. We can't move forward the way we want to, because of them, not because of us. And the thing that has to be addressed is their sense of their own subjectivity, in that, no matter how much we've done— thirty years of incredible work— they still see themselves as objective, neutral, normal, and value-free, and us as special-interest and marginal. And that's what has to be addressed, so that they can see us as Americans, and John Updike can recognize himself as a minority. There are actually more lesbians in this country than people who live like John Updike. Yet he's the emblematic American voice. Switching that paradigm is our next step, and its extremely daunting.

dg: There is a scene in *Rat Bohemia* in which Rita checks Lourdes out in a computer store. Lourdes is playing a fast-paced video game, and Rita's looking over her shoulder at the screen. Their meeting... their relationship at this point almost takes on the speed of the game. Is this a dynamic that you feel is apparent in gay and lesbian relationships in 1997... and activism, for that matter?

ss: One of the problems is that we just keep reacting. Straight people set the agenda, we react. And that's how we end up with things like marriage and the military being our primary issues. When to me right now it's familial homophobia— how the family is the model for homophobia in this society. And this issue of subjectivity. We're caught in this very strange moment where the gay press and the mainstream press have no oppositionality. They both represent the same point of view. So there's no discourse, so the ideas are not discussed in public. Maybe on the Internet,

or in things like the Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review, a smaller and more obscure journal.

dg: What about the Gay Community News? ss: GCN is also small... and erratic. But the problem is that were pandering for their approval, and I understand that because I want their approval also, even though I don't think I should want it, I do want it. It's a deeply emotional state. But then we don't have autonomy in terms of our own debate. That's the conflict there.

dg: You mentioned earlier that familial homophobia ought to be a main focus of debate in the gay community. Could you say something further about that?



Author/Activist Sarah Schulman

ss: The family is the place where homophobia is learned for the first time. It's where you find out what the expectations are, what the general expectations are, and what the disappointments are, even when parents get over it. And it's where straight siblings learn how to use

homophobia or heterosexuality as currency within the family. So that if you have a person that's gone out in the world, and is not realizing their dreams, and they feel like a failure. But if in their family, they're straight— then they have an investment in maintaining their superiority, even if they're not ideologically opposed to homosexuality. I was reading this incredible book in Holocaust Studies by Daniel Goldhagen called *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. It's a book that really blew my mind. And one of the things he talks about is the rhetoric that people oppress other people with because they're afraid of them, because they're not educated— you know, Fear of Other. But actually, people do it because they enjoy it. There is a great pleasure in doing that. And once you recognize that, you get at a core of something about homophobia. That it's not only about fear of homosexuality. Some people couldn't give a shit about my sexuality, or have no problem with homosexuality. But they need to be elevated, and that's why they're dependent on it.

dg: So, in families around here in Addison County, and in rural Vermont, it's a strange moment. Because, people two, four, eight years younger than me that I know feel a need to come out to their parents before they do anything else. Because they see the possibility that they won't get thrown out, they want to hold back on exploring themselves until they can get their parents in the know about it. I'm thinking of what you've already said about getting straight people's approval. What do you think about that kind of dynamic?

ss: OK, Im almost 40. Im 39. And in my generational experience, gay people were told, "Well, your family's all fucked up. Go make your own family." But no way— I don't think that's an adequate response. Gay people have a right to have a family. These people that you're talking about have a right to have a relationship with their parents, even if their parents resist it. They're in the right. Their demand is appropriate, and the sense of entitlement is proper.

Actually, parents should be incredibly proud when their kids come out, because it means that their children are very self-aware.

dg: You've said in the past that community is really important to gay people, and that straight people don't have it. Why is that?

an interview with  
**Riki Anne Wilchins**  
activist, author,  
*Transgender Menace*

by Jess Bell

jb: From the cover onward, *Read My Lips* is no the usual trans-book, is it?

raw: Well, I tried to make that point from the picture of me as a woman and then as a man on the front cover. What I enjoy about those pictures is that I look like I'm in drag both. Most books from the genderfolks so far have the subtext of "This is who I really am inside, please accept me." I wanted this book to make the point that gender is about performance, not identity. And it's only to win a degree of respect, a place to stand in this world, that I've had to make the case that I'm really a man or a woman or something 'inside.' I don't care about anyone's accepting me. I do care about the way bodies, gender and desire are used to keep people down, to marginalize them, keep them from entering the political process to wage a struggle for their political lives.

jb: Why this book, at this particular moment for you? raw: *Read My Lips* really came out of my experience in organizing, first in the protest group Transexual Menace, and for the last couple years in GenderPAC, a national advocacy group dedicated to pursuing "gender, affectional, and racial equality." Most of us aren't simple people; have complex, messy lives in which all kinds of oppression are joined. But identity politics makes us slice our lives into so many separate pieces like wedges of a pizza: this part to the NAACP and race, this part to NOW and feminism, this part to HRC and gay rights. GenderPAC is about the possibility of building a post-identity movement which encourages people to make connection in their lives instead of to sever them.

jb: Did you find this kind of separation in your activism?

raw: All the time. For instance, when Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant, was beaten and tortured by the NYPD, GenderPAC contributed money so that the Menace could join the city-wide demonstration of protest. But we were asked, "why is this your problem." And our response was, "If you can't make the

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ss: Well, what are the things which make gay people different from straight people? Number one, they have coming-out as an experience which has no parallel in heterosexual life. So every gay person has gone through a place where they've really looked inside themselves, and have a self-awareness experience and an individuality experience that straight people never have. And then, you don't have a path. Straight people have a path to follow, and we don't have that. And sometimes its really painful and sometimes it's fantastic. And I really hope we don't get one. I don't want the gay path to be marriage and motherhood. We would be losing so much. I think lesbians are crazy to want to get married. Were in a country where women are earning half of what men earn. And so if you have families with two women's incomes and children, that's a poverty family.