



Ellen DeGeneres is a CoverGirl cosmetics spokesperson and the gay marriage debate is sweeping the nation—but are these the victories we should be fighting for?

By **Stephanie Schroeder**

**T**HE LATE DEL MARTIN, a pioneer of the modern lesbian rights movement, was able to legally marry Phyllis Lyon, her partner of 55 years, in 2008. Was that marriage a hard-won right or just a sliver of a piece of the mainstream pie aimed at keeping lesbians happy—at least momentarily? Radical queer activists smell elitism in the right to marry. There is a current backlash—or rather increased forward movement—among radical queer and anti-assimilationist lesbian activists to ensure rights for all, not just a privileged few.

Though marriage is at the forefront of what straight society sees lesbians fighting for, some lesbians don't think it's really all that it's cracked up to be. "State-sanctioned marriage separates people and values certain kinds of relationships over others," says Aliza Shapiro, a Boston-based producer, performer and artist. Shapiro's Truth Serum Productions presents events that often push the boundaries of sexuality, gender, the personal and political.

"I'd like to see queers fight for abolishment of all state-sanctioned marriage. Acceptance into the mainstream isn't my endgame. You want to have a ceremony and contracts—great, but why should couples get tax breaks along with the

# Breaking Out

KitchenAid?" Shapiro asks. "The thing that separates us from heterosexuals is the sex we have. People have forgotten that up until 2003 our sex was illegal. Our sexual expression, especially if it includes bondage and discipline or S/M, which it often does, can still get us into a heap of trouble. I get that there are people who want to fight for mainstream privileges. But that fight continues to leave people behind, and that gets under my skin."

Self-identified as a black lesbian feminist poet-warrior, the late Audre Lorde wrote in her 1984 essay addressing black lesbian feminist concerns about white feminism, "It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but

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they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support."

Mainstream gaydom vs. radical queerness is not so much about labels as a commitment to social justice in our own backyard. Lorde's statement resonates today for radical queer activists who say it's really all about helping out, thinking about and fighting for people who don't look like you, think like you or act like you. A radical queer, anti-assimilationist element has existed in the lesbian community at least since Stonewall. In fact, it was the original lesbian and gay movement that fought against a white-collar, corporate ethic that was willing to support only the simplest reforms. Reform politics are sneaky and insidious, says Gina de Vries, a self-described queer femme writer, rabble-rouser and sex worker who also penned the Hey! Baby column for *curve* from 1997 to 2004. According to her, reform politics tend to give a small portion of the community access to mainstream privilege, creating a gay elite, rather than addressing true disenfranchisement in society.

"It's the upper echelons of the gay population—primarily male, but not completely, mostly white, upper-middle-class, with access to higher education, healthcare, high-level jobs and all types of privilege—who are clamoring for the same rights as the mainstream," says de Vries. "I see the gay struggle more in terms of survival. If the only way we can obtain healthcare is through marriage, that is wrong. I don't begrudge lesbians who do marry to obtain healthcare and work the system and make choices perhaps not otherwise made, for survival's sake. But, we are worthy of more than survival. It's as if those queers lucky enough to have well paying jobs with good health insurance are saying, 'Well, I have my privilege, so I don't need to worry about those who can't get adequate healthcare or a decent living-wage job or access to education.'"

There is a whole section of the mainstream LGBT movement, such as the ubiquitous Human Rights Campaign, that

activists who have been around forever," says de Vries. "For me the marriage part is very complicated. A lot of it arises around the separation of church and state. It can be very spiritual and romantic and I like seeing the expression and celebration of love between two women, but having the state in bed with us strikes me as very strange."

According to younger radical queer activists, there's a myopic focus on "me first" politics within today's lesbian community, with women focusing only on issues that affect them as individuals, rather than on a broader agenda of social justice.

One such activist is Deeg, who is a longtime member of LAGAI: Queer Insurrection, a radical lesbian group focused on wide-ranging grassroots initiatives such as agitating against United States intervention abroad and against lesbian assimilation. The group uses direct action such as guerilla theater and satire, and also publishes the newsletter *UltraViolet*, which "highlights the invisible fringe of the rainbow." LAGAI looks through the lens of a revolutionary analysis of class, race, "ownership of children" and other historically mainstream constructs that have prevented lesbians from gaining true respect, acceptance and access to society—not simply the tolerance of mainstream reformism. The group, like most radical queers, is anti-capitalist and works against the patriarchal systems that continue to persist in our society.

"Since lesbians in general have been pushed out of the constituency of the gay agenda, now more than ever we need to put lesbian identity forth as a cherished one in the community," asserts Deeg. "It's a different thing altogether to fight for rights than to fight for liberation." Of the work she and the other members of LAGAI do, Deeg says, "We are creating a vision that will make it better for all of us, not just a small portion of us. And that is what this revolution is all about—the 40-hour work week at a dead-end job just keeps us all busy and not fighting for what we deserve. Owning children and the fake lesbian nuclear family is a deteriorated vision; instead we want freedom. We don't want to be the same as straight

# of the Mainstream

projects an image of itself as the voice of the queer movement. But radical feminists don't recognize the spirit of the queer movement in mainstream organizing, in which goal is to gain access to institutions that lesbians in the '70s originally wanted to demolish. "We sought to completely dismantle marriage and the military-industrial complex, not gain access to them," says Joan E. Biren, who was activist in the early lesbian feminist movement. "Liberation, as opposed to rights, meant remaking society to be better for everyone, not just 'gays' getting a fair share of the status quo."

"To say there is a backlash against the mainstreaming of gayness makes radical queers sound like a new phenomenon, as if we are outsiders coming in from the outside rather than

society. We're not the same, so let's stop pretending we are."

Radical activists agree that more lesbians need to step outside of our comfort zone and look at those who are unlike us in the community. Individuals who dress differently, who are of different ages, races and levels of social and physical mobility, and have divergent identifications across the LGBT spectrum. "It's really not an either-or situation," says de Vries. "It's a matter of life and death for those merely subsisting while so many of their lesbian and gay counterparts revel in their little cocoons. And the gap between the gay elite and those people of all persuasions who have little or nothing is growing. No one in the community can justify sitting on the sidelines doing nothing. That is not an option." ■

