

Bridging Multicultural Education

Bringing Sexual Orientation into the Children's and Young Adult Literature Classrooms

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Playwright / activist Tomi Avicoli writes:

School was one of the more painful experiences of my youth. The neighborhood bullies could be avoided. The taunts of the children living in those endless repetitive row houses could be evaded by staying in my room. But school was something I had to face day after day for some two hundred mornings a year. (330)

As Avicoli notes, attending school is mandatory. There is, short of dropping out, no way of avoiding the pain that results from physical and psychological abuse: the taunts of schoolmates, the sense of isolation from others, and a lack of protection on the part of teachers or administrators. Because I have worked with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or intersexed (hereafter l/g/b/t/i) students in universities in Georgia, Kentucky, and Ohio inside and out of the classroom, I am very aware that the pain of elementary and high school is often overwhelming and leaves scars that take years to heal, if they ever do. I am also aware that heterosexual students are often not aware of the depth of pain that their taunts or silence creates, for cultural messages tell them that hate speech toward l/g/b/t/i students is allowable. Because name calling and ridicule begin in elementary

school, I believe it is vital to begin interrogation of attitudes toward sexuality in elementary education.¹ While the past twenty years have shown gains in including African American, Mexican, Latina/o, Chicana/o, Asian American, and Native American experience in curricula, the same is certainly not true for literature that includes experiences of

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l/g/b/t/i persons. Too few states or school districts attempt to defuse the prejudices that are apparent in schools and in the greater culture.² In her essay "Homophobia, Why Bring It Up?" African American activist and writer Barbara Smith notes: "Homophobia is usually the last oppression to be mentioned, the last to be taken seriously, the last to go. But it is extremely serious, sometimes to the point of being fatal" (112). Smith continues, "curriculum

that focuses in a positive way upon issues of sexual identity, sexuality, and sexism is still rare ... yet schools are virtual cauldrons of homophobic sentiment, as witness by everything from the graffiti in the bathrooms and the put-downs yelled on the playground to the heterosexist bias of most texts and the firing of teachers on no other basis than that they are not heterosexual" (114). As an African American lesbian, Smith understands that none of our lives are based on one single issue like sexuality, and that one way to understand the complexity and nature of intersecting and overlapping oppressions, and stereotypes, is look at them in combination in the classroom: "making connections between oppressions is an excellent way to introduce the subjects of lesbian and gay male identity and homophobia, because it offers people a frame of reference on which to build. ... It is factually inaccurate and strategically mistaken to present the materials as if all gay people were white and male" (115).

At the regional campus in Appalachian Ohio where I teach it is vital for education majors who are mostly white working class students, often first generation college students, who have strong ties to fundamental religious beliefs, that issues that interrogate race, class and gender, including l/g/b/t/i issues, be included in the curriculum. Certainly the violence of the past few years, frequent gay-bash-

ing, the well publicized death of Matthew Shepard, and shootings at numerous schools around the country which are often related in some way to sexism or to sexual innuendo, indicate the need for students to examine and change the prejudices that are so widely held. Warren Blumenfeld points out that "issues relating to GLBT people should be formally and permanently integrated into existing courses across the curriculum" and "homophobia and other 'diversity' workshops should be implemented for the entire campus community to sensitize and educate staff, faculty, and administrators" (*Massachusetts Governor's Commission*). Mary Elliot writes that by not including l/g/b/t/i issues in classroom discussion and materials, and not attempting to lessen homophobia, lesbian and gay teachers who remain in the closet "may find themselves in the position of protecting the very institutions that exclude them, and their students, from full participation" in the university community, in the classroom, and in the culture.

I believe the most important classes in which to include multicultural issues are children's and young adult literature classes, for if future teachers are without awareness of the issues and of the literature that can counter racism, classism, ableism, sexism, and homophobia, attitudes and practices in schools will not change. When such intervention does not occur we face high drop-out rates for l/g/b/t/i teens, the highest teen suicide rate of any group, and hate crimes of teens who physically abuse or murder l/g/b/t/i people, or people who seem so to them, or the hate crimes of students who feel they have been targeted as objects of ridicule, i.e. fags. The words of choice used to denigrate others from early elementary through high school are gay, faggot, lezzie, dyke, or homo. As teacher Cora Sangree says in Debra Chasoff's film *It's Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in Schools*, "Kids hear this information all the time [and what they hear] reinforces stereotypes." Sangree notes that in discussing gay issues, she talks about gays with regard to community and culture, "not gay sex. Talking about gay sex is not appropriate."

L/g/b/t/i issues can be brought into the classroom in the same way as any other multicultural issue: through literature, discussion, and writing. Some states mandate anti-homophobic education, but when states, school districts, and school boards do not, teachers may have to educate themselves. An excellent starting place is Chasoff's film, a film I use in Children's Literature classes. *It's*

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Elementary provides both insights into prejudices and homophobia and methods for examining homophobia, stereotypes, and prejudices in the language arts or social studies classroom. In the film, Daithe Wolfe, a teacher in Madison, Wisconsin, notes that the standard curriculum already holds many ways to introduce gay history and gay issues. Both he and Robert Roth, a California social studies teacher, use webbing or mapping as ways of creating connections, examining stereotypes, and entering discussion. Webbing and mapping are both common brainstorming strategies in language arts (and other subject area) classrooms that help students prepare for writing. In full class discussion, students provide terms and ideas related to a central theme like homophobia. The instructor records these contributions on a chalkboard or whiteboard, connecting them to the central concept, which is placed in a circle at center, and to each other by means of diagrammatic lines. In this way, students gain access to others' perceptions of the concept, often clarify their own thinking, and develop ideas and gain assistance with organization for writing. Roth uses free writing as a follow-up to the mapping discussion.

As Chasoff's film shows, at other schools, Manhattan Country Day School and Cambridge Friends School, literature is used for discussion.

Cambridge Friends School teachers use *Asha's Mums* with early elementary students as a way of providing insights, understanding, and empathy, and as a way of developing a sense of justice. In this book, Asha's class is going on a field trip. Her teacher, however, won't accept Asha's permission slip because it is signed by both of her mothers. She tells Asha that she can't have two mothers. Student discussion shows that the students understand Asha's position, and how hurt and upset her teacher's actions make her: just how unjust these actions are.

While materials are fairly easy to integrate, without background knowledge about gender and sexuality, teachers may be reluctant to include materials about sexuality and gender because of fear of name-calling during discussion. However, in their essay "Locating a Place for Gay and Lesbian Themes in Elementary Reading, Writing, and Talking," James R. King and Jennifer Jasinski Schneider write that responses to name calling can open up real discussion about "why such talk is harmful and inappropriate" (126). Although King's and Schneider's work focuses on early elementary school experience, discussing name calling as "an intent to demean" (127) through the use of the power of language has not lost its potency for discussion in the classroom, kindergarten through college, particularly because the names used, while common in school hallways, are seldom addressed. Such discussions reveal the underlying necessity of negativity of terms that demean l/g/b/t/i people—and women—to heterosexual regulation of the population. Such discussions can illuminate how these are a part of the "mechanisms behind sexist, patriarchal notions of masculinity" (128) that so often deprive women, whether heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, or intersex or transgender, of the rights and opportunities to live full lives and to achieve all of which they are capable.

Chasoff's film looks at these issues. It also dispels the stereotype that only l/g/b/t/i people feel that gay issues in school are important, or that neutrality is desirable. In *College English* Mary Elliot points out that despite what teachers would like to suppose, the

classroom is not neutral, for "neutrality ... is a universal cultural default setting which is almost always presumed to be heterosexual and white; it is not available to those who cannot 'pass' as either or both" (698). As Elliot indicates, the gay teacher "coming out [in the classroom] challenges dominant thinking and institutional heterosexism [and] provides a model and personal contact for gay, lesbian, and heterosexual students alike, facilitating the unlearning of prejudice" (698). This "challenge" to "dominant thinking" applies, however, whether or not the teacher is l/g/t/b/i or heterosexual, for the normativity and naturalization of heterosexuality must be challenged if all children are to benefit from education. As James Sears points out, challenging stereotypical ideas about gender and sexuality requires educators who "model honesty, civility, authenticity, integrity, fairness, and respect" while "creating classrooms that challenge categorical thinking, promote interpersonal intelligence, and foster critical consciousness" (4-5).

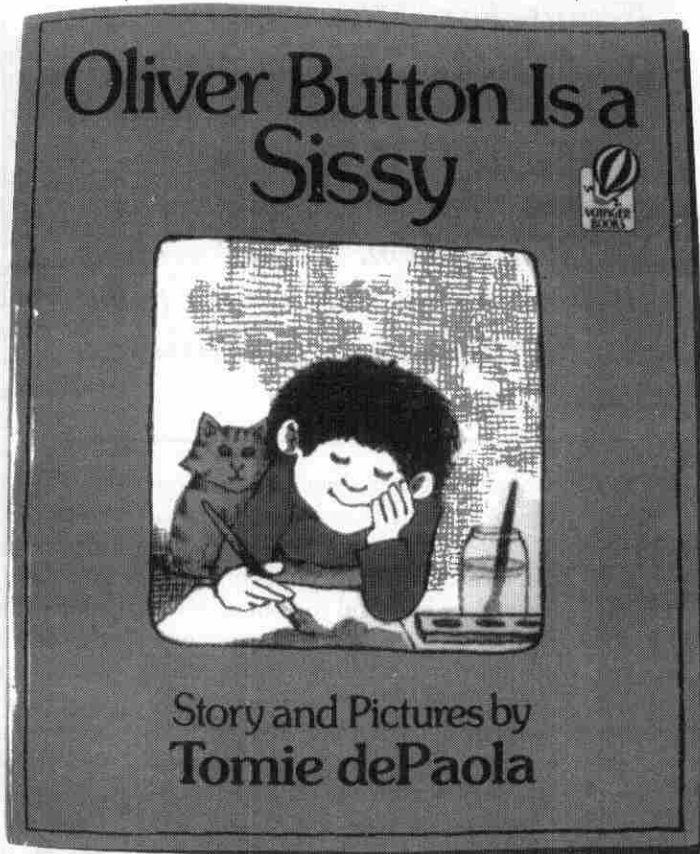
Wayne Martino writes that teachers can "help students interrogate familiar patterns of thinking that often resort to defining sexual identity in oppositional terms and as a stable category" (137), allowing interrogation of "compulsory heterosexuality" and the binary oppositions of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual that have been enforced through patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. Martino analyzes student responses and experiences of six teachers in a Catholic high school which had as eighth grade required reading Morris Gleitzman's novel *Two Weeks With the Queen*, the story of a boy who is sent away from home because his brother is dying. He becomes friends with a gay man whose partner is dying of AIDS. Although Martino notes that teachers "tended... to work with liberal humanist notions

of identity... that allowed students to challenge particular stereotypes about gay men" (a strategy that primarily provokes tolerance), student responses indicated a high level of involvement with the text which opens the possibility for teaching that will result in "interrupting heteronormativity" to move "beyond positions of mere acceptance and tolerance of the *other* to encourage students to think about what we take for granted as 'normal' and 'natural'" (135-139, 147). Because heterosexuality is socially constructed as "normal" in

tics, showing how social constructions affect notions of sexuality. For instance, pink for girls and blue for boys; girls characterized as playing with dolls and boys with trucks; mothers and girls as "nurturing" while fathers and boys are "strong" and, in the case of perceptions of fathers, "disciplinarians." Socially constructed expectations of families can also be investigated by the use of discussion, mapping and clustering, and writing that asks children to identify the makeup of families that they know about from their experience and

from reading. As Martino notes, "there are tremendous possibilities for teachers to engage students in this kind of critical work" (148). Such interrogation may be a part of critical looks at many either/or (binary) social constructions. As Suzanne Pharr points out, "it is virtually impossible to view one oppression... in isolation because they are all connected: sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, ageism" (53). Pharr notes that oppressions are not possible without "common elements" which include a "defined norm" that is backed up by "institutional power, economic power, and both institutional and individual violence": "the combination of these three elements... makes complete control possible" (53). Looking at families,

friendships and relationships critically with regard to the ways in which concepts are passed on through culture can continue on into the ways in which love, friendship, and concepts of family become limited in scope in cultures constructed to privilege binary oppositions. Students can begin to understand the ways in which narrow conceptions not only limit our humanity but also create stereotypes, prejudices, racism, sexism, and homophobia. Such critical thinking calls into question those mores that are so often taken for



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our culture, the wide range of sexualities possible for humans is largely ignored by many educators. Perceived gender roles are also closely related to sexuality in narrow definitions which privilege heterosexuality.

While investigation of sexual acts and sexual activity is not appropriate for children, investigation of gender roles and the ways that sexuality is characterized in those narrow cultural definitions is appropriate. Such investigation can start with such simple concepts as expected gender roles and social prac-

granted not only by children, but by adults as well.

Students can explore the ways categories created through the use of two oppositional pronouns like he and she or hers and his work. Who is included in those pronouns? Who is excluded? If a child who is narrowly defined as "male" is not interested in the gender roles "normally" associated with male children, how is that child treated? What terms are often used for ridicule? How do these terms reflect the values that this culture places on "male" and "female" identity? How do the constructions of gender and sexuality that they represent allow enfranchisement or disenfranchisement? How do sexism, heterosexism and homophobia work together to constrain sexuality and gender and to punish transgression of these categories?

Sexual and gender constructions have become "naturalized" through the expectations that they create, yet critical examination shows the ways in which they fail. As Minnie Bruce Pratt writes of Leslie Feinberg, these dualistic pronouns cannot capture the complexity of his/her existence. Pratt realizes this inadequacy when the possibilities for sexual identification are reduced to the either/or of the masculine or feminine (88). Jess, Feinberg's character in her *Stone Butch Blues*, realizes that whether or not she is a man or a woman "could never be answered as long as those were the only choices" (222). In *Gender Outlaw* Kate Bornstein writes of being a woman trapped in a man's body who underwent a sex change operation in order to feel "whole." Bornstein writes: "The choice between two of something is not a choice at all, but rather the opportunity to subscribe to the value system which holds the two presented choices as mutually exclusive alternatives" (101). In much the same way activist Suzanne Pharr notes that fear helps to control women and sexuality and that homophobia bolsters heterosexism, Bornstein notes that she once "tacitly support[ed] all the rules of the gender system. . . in order to belong, or rather to *not* be an outsider" (101). She points out that defense of gender and

sexual boundaries leads to gay bashing, murder of gays and lesbians, and that the violence of gay bashing has much to do with punishment for "violat[ing] the rules of gender in this culture" (105). Like Pharr, Bornstein realizes, "The most obviously violent structure within the cult of gender is sexism, misogyny. Misogyny is necessary to maintain the cult of gender" (105).

Children can understand and need to understand that words can be effective

Because love of flowers is typically constructed as "female," the term "pansy" when applied to "males" implies an un-"masculine" softness, "female" identification, and denigration. "Sissy," so often applied to men who appear to be gay, transgendered, or intersexed, comes from sister.

weapons, and that seemingly innocuous words, particularly sexist language that reflects constructions formed through employment of binary oppositions, can be used to hurt and to control. They need to be helped to look beyond prejudices to understand the ways in which particular sexist words that are used to denigrate l/g/b/t/i people and differently gendered people reflect cultural denigration of women as well. For instance, categories of male and female have words that are closely related to sexual and gender constructions. For example, because love of flowers is typically constructed as "female," the term "pansy" when applied to "males" implies an un-"masculine" softness, "female" identification, and denigration. "Sissy," so often applied to men who appear to be gay, transgendered, or intersexed, comes from sister. If this term is a derogatory word when applied to "males," then it reflects the underlying misogyny in the culture. And faggot, the most common term of denigration in schools today, refers to the bundles of wood gathered to kindle the fires to burn witches during the Middle Ages in Europe, witches who were usually female.

Gender and sex bias in language used against l/g/b/t/i people is stronger and more hurtful when applied to "male" children than to young girls. While a derogatory word, the term "tom-boy" when applied to a girl does not have the stigma associated with "sissy," "pansy," or other terms commonly used to denigrate young gay men, or those who appear to be gay. Disputing prejudices, interrupting taken-for-granted assumptions, and helping children to un-learn the prejudices and often deadly biases transmitted through culture requires understanding of the ways in which binary oppositions in language are implicated in keeping homophobia, racism, sexism, classism, and other "isms" used to denigrate particular individuals or populations alive, and even very young children can engage in interrogation of the constructions of language that reinforce binary oppositions of these sorts and homophobia.

Children can theorize about homophobia, sexuality and gender roles with knowledge that can be enhanced and enlarged through reading, and attitudes can change. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes: "Theory produces effects that change people and the way they perceive the world. Thus we need *teorías* . . . that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis" (xxv-xxvi). Materials that are helpful in such critical thinking, theorizing, and discussing include *Asha's Mums* which combats internalized oppression and forwards social justice as well as creating understanding of varying constructions of family. Some other picture books include Barbara Lynn Edmonds' *Mama Eat Ant, Yuck!*, Joseph Kennedy's *Lucy Goes to the Country*, Lesléa Newman's *Heather Has Two Mommies*, Johnny Valentine's *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads*, and Michael Willhoite's *Daddy's Roommate*. Books suitable for older children include Marion Dane Bauer's *Am I Blue? Coming Out of the Silence*, several of Chris Crutcher's sports/adventure novels, James Haskins's biography of Bayard Rustin, Gigi Kaeser's *Love Makes a Family*, Jacqueline Woodson's *From the Notebooks of*

Melanin Sun and *The House You Pass on the Way*, both of which take on stereotypical constructions of race, gender, and sexuality. Kevin Jennings' *Becoming Visible: A Reader in Gay and Lesbian History for High School* is appropriate for middle school as well as high school children.

I have found it helpful to be very open and honest with students, discussing my own internalized prejudices and how I continually work toward awareness and lessening of these. Incorporating interrogation of heterosexuality, discussing a continuum of sexuality, and the diversity of choices of gender roles like that of Tomie dePaola's *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* allows sex and gender to be seen in ways that are not stereotypical nor prejudicial. It is possible to go beyond the usual depiction of homosexuality as being only about sexuality without regard for the complexity of a whole person, and to point out as Cora Sangree does in *It's Elementary*, that l/g/b/t/i people form communities, hold jobs, go to school, live in families, create families, and build friendships. In that film, Noé Gutierrez makes an additional point often overlooked when school administrators, teachers, and community members have conversations about gay materials and issues in schools. He notes that often the concept is that "gay people are coming to our schools" as though no gay children are present in schools. But, Gutierrez notes "I was a [gay] child, and I was in school." He continues, pointing out that neither speakers nor materials that combat homophobia are bringing "something or someone" to the classroom that is not already there. In *It's Elementary* teacher Thelma Delgado-Josey tells of homophobia that was endemic in the Puerto Rican culture of which she was a part. She had to overcome the homophobia she had learned, but she has done this, for because of the racism and invisibility that was directed toward her and her culture, she knows what it is like "not to be affirmed in the classroom because I was not as a child." From her experience, Delgado-Josey realizes that "being there" for her students includes creating a safe space for difference, whether that difference is concerned with race, gender, sexuality, class, or ability.

As teachers, we need to deconstruct the biases of education to allow all of our students to think critically and to live full and vital lives. As philosopher/educator Glorianne Leck writes: "It is unacceptable to deprive children of credible information about their sexuality, about human and social diversity, and about the abuse of power within families, within schools, and within religious group relationships." We can, as Leck notes, move "forward into new opportunities for dialogue that can dramatically, dynamically, and subtly open vital new possibilities for more reflective and just practices of schooling" (260). 

1. *Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth: Report of the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth*, Boston, MA: The Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993, reports 97% of students in public high schools hear homophobic comments regularly and 53% hear staff and teachers' homophobic comments. More information is available at "Issues: Information About Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered and Questioning Youth." National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and "Just the Facts: On Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students and Schools," Gay, Lesbian & Straight Teacher's Network (GLSTN); *Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide*, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, DHHS Pub. No. (ADM) 89-1624.4, Washington, D.C.: Supt of Docs., U.S. Govt Print. Off., 1989; Nardi, Peter and Ralph Bolton, "Gay-Bashing: Violence and Aggression Against Gay Men and Lesbians" in Peter M. Nardi and Beth E. Schneider, Eds. *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Reader*, New York: Routledge, 1998: 412-433.
2. California, Connecticut, New Jersey, Maine, Minnesota, Vermont, and Wisconsin prohibit discrimination. Washington State prohibits harassment based on sexual orientation. "NJ Governor Signs GLBT-Inclusive Safe School

Legislation." (July 3, 2002). National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

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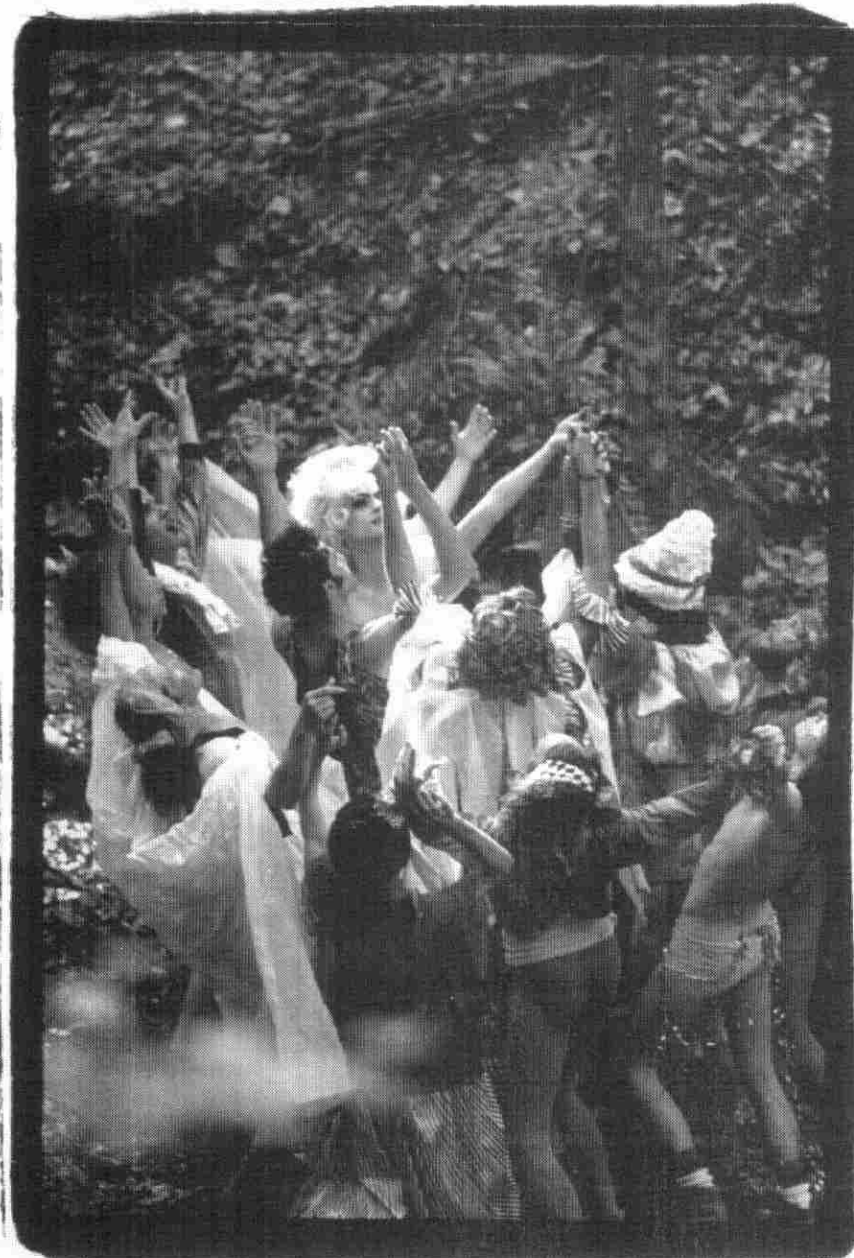
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"Radical Faeries" in Spring Ritual at Short Mountain Sanctuary in Liberty, Tennessee, 1992. Photo by Keith Gemerick.

