

Regarding Bayard
By Craig Washington

The popular history of the civil rights movement centralizes the work of two key figures, Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. While Parks is one of the few well-known female activists of that era, her role has been reduced to that of an uppity sister who spontaneously stood up for herself by sitting down in a Montgomery bus. These sexist historians do not tell us that Parks was a carefully selected organizer and that this was a planned act of resistance. Since Martin Luther King was ill-prepared to lead the ensuing boycott, a revered pacifist named Bayard Rustin was summoned by preeminent organizer A. Phillip Randolph to train King in non-violent philosophy and grass roots organizing. While Parks has received major acclaim during her lifetime, widespread recognition of Rustin's contributions still eludes him 16 years after his death. Mainstream and black media alike rarely mention him, and when they do, they tend to omit the fact that he was openly homosexual. His immeasurable value to that movement has been only partially, begrudgingly cited. His values and ideals hold many lessons for contemporary black gays striving for self-acceptance and social equality.

Rustin came from a close-knit family of black Quakers. Because he was born out of wedlock, his maternal grandmother Julia chose to raise him with the help of numerous relatives. His numerous accomplishments include organizing the "Journey of Reconciliation" in 1947 which defied segregation laws by sending black and white organizers riding together on public transit; teaching and organizing pacifist resistance in Africa, Chile and Poland; serving as King's key advisor during the Montgomery bus boycott; and organizing the fabled 1963 March on Washington. In 1952, Rustin was arrested in Pasadena for having sex in a car with two men and was later fired from the Friends of Reconciliation. Many civil rights organizers later distanced themselves from him because of this scandal and his refusal to hide his homosexuality even though they benefited largely from his talents.

In subsequent years, veteran activists failed to note Rustin's efforts thereby obscuring one of their key leaders. Black gays and lesbians in the '80's were among the first to educate themselves and others about his legacy. Other Countries, the New York based black gay male writers' collective, published a journal that featured an interview with Rustin shortly before his death in 1987. Throughout the nineties, black lgbt activists in Atlanta and other cities named rallies, programs, and awards after him in order to reclaim his legacy. Several biographies have been published which tend to portray Rustin as a seminal unsung hero whose views, affiliations and sexual orientation set him at odds with some of his contemporaries. Rustin received posthumous attention in 2002 when a group of residents from his birthplace West Chester Pennsylvania opposed the school board's decision to name a high school after him because he was briefly a member of a Communist youth and he was openly gay. Some measure of long awaited justice was served when the school board refuted the

petition and named the school after their most distinguished son. On Martin Luther King Jr Day 2003, PBS aired the long overdue documentary "Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin". During that weekend, Hands On Atlanta presented a screening and public discussion of the film at the MLK Center for Non-Violent Social Change.

You owe it to yourself to find out more about this astute strategist. It is said that service is the rent we pay for our stay here on earth. The only meaningful way for us to really honor Rustin is to emulate him by making our own unique commitment and contribution to human rights. Through learning about Rustin, we may acquire the tools to extricate ourselves from the myths that constrain us today.

We often tell ourselves that we are not skilled or bold enough to contribute to those causes we may sincerely believe in. "Leader worship," perpetuates the fallacy that activism is the exclusive domain of those who possess specific talents, and look and speak in certain ways. We may think we must be out or publicly visible in order to make a difference. We don't all have to serve like Rustin in order to serve. Instead we can be inspired by his example to give what we can in accordance with our own gifts and do that excellently. Many of us are closeted or uncomfortable with high profile movement work, but that doesn't have to prevent us from taking a step beyond where we have gone before. You may maintain a low profile and go online or visit a library and read an essay by Audre Lorde, James Baldwin or Rustin himself. You can send a check to ZAMI, which offers annual scholarships to black lesbian and gay male students or Unity Fellowship, an affirming church led by an openly gay pastor.

Along our lifelong journey toward self-love, brothers in the life are often derailed by the myth that we have to be as overtly masculine as possible in order to reconcile our homosexuality with our manhood. As a middle-aged gay man, I mourn the loss of a diversity of male archetypes once commonly displayed in the life. Before today's hypermasculine norms (an affliction I often nickname "butch queen-itis") dominated black gay male sexual and social culture, we celebrated a broader spectrum of gender expression. The confluence of AIDS, unhealed shame and this deification of the masculine image has wiped the effete man off our cultural landscape. Ironically, without the queens, there would have been no Stonewall uprising nor the resultant gay liberation movements and cultures that followed. None of the clubs where the djs spin songs that dehumanize gays and women, where we no longer have a place for sissies, would have been built were it not for the queens we so readily disown. As you become more acquainted with Rustin you may learn to appreciate the fact that he was fairly effeminate. You could clock it from an airplane. He apparently was not concerned with butching it up in order to win acceptance. And while he was denied his full due, for the most part he was regarded as a black man of service, a brother who demonstrated a tenacious love for his people.

Another enduring myth is that brothers who partner with white men are automatically "snow queens" who are disconnected from black people and ineffectual as community organizers. The contributions of popular black gays

who have dated whites have been devalued by fellow activists and those who have done far less for the cause. If you watch the Brother Outsider film, you will observe that Rustin had a series of white lovers. His relationships with white men did not diminish his participation on the main stage of black liberation long before his detractors ever picked up a picket sign or dismissed him as an uncle tom sexual pervert. Consider this the next time you see yourself or someone else berating someone simply because he dates a white person.

The name that we call ourselves as quite a point of contention in black list serves, conferences and discussion groups across the country. We often make specific assumptions about one's pride in their race or sexual orientation based on what label they choose. While some same-gender loving folks think that people who identify as gay blindly follow white gay agendas, some gay blacks believe that those who don't call themselves "gay" must be ashamed of being homosexual. Rustin never prioritized gay liberation as a focus for his work. At the same time, he was, by contemporary standards, extremely "out" and is now heralded as a black gay legend. Baldwin, the most well known openly homosexual black writer, refused to call himself gay or specifically politicize his sexual orientation. Yet his work placed homosexuality in the context of the universal human need of love and championed the rights of all to be free to love whomever they choose. A deeper understanding of how these men framed their sexual identities may help us to relinquish the confining myth that we need to call ourselves a common name to work toward common goals.

We have a lot to gain from the example of Rustin's illustrious life. His near erasure reminds us of the sanctity of our history, and demands that we rediscover our sister and brother outsiders and tell their stories to our young. We need engaging and accessible ways to teach ourselves about our forebears so that they become relevant to our political, sexual, and cultural lives. I invite you to commit to learn more than you already know about at least one black gay freedom fighter of any era. As we come upon Black History month, you can extend the list of usual suspects to include people like Fannie Lou Hamer, Pat Parker, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, Assoto Saint and others. You may find yourself moved to organize an informal group discussion, arrange a black gay history book club, or volunteer with an organization that serves us. You may be surprised to discover the power you have to expand your own consciousness and make positive change in your community.