

TG PEOPLE OF COLOR

TRANSGEN '96, FRIDAY, 5 JULY, 1996

REPORT FROM THE WORKSHOP: TG PEOPLE OF COLOR

BY: DANA TURNER The legal needs of TG people of color were considered by five panelists.

Gloria Wright, a person of African-American descent and former president of Chicago Gender Society

Bina Aspen, a person of African-American descent and an electrologist, with a practice among transgendered people. She also is a spouse of a postoperative transsexual.

Elvia Arriola, a person of Hispanic-American descent, who is a law professor at the University of Texas.

Elena, a person of Japanese descent, who is a transgendered activist.

Dana Turner (Moderator), a person of African-American descent, a lawyer and the transgendered special events coordinator of the 1993 March on Washington.

The panel opened with comments by Dana Turner, presenting a brief history of transgendered people of color. She pointed out that 27 years ago, the seminal Stonewall riot was begun by black and Puerto Rican drag queens and 25 butch dyke lesbians, and led to five nights of riots in New York City's Greenwich Village. That civil uprising was the birth of the modern gay and lesbian civil rights movement. It was pointed out that the most oppressed have the least to lose and are therefore frequently forced to walk the point of civil rights activism, social revolution, and political change.

People of color have not only led this movement in modern times, but have been prominent and out transgendered peoples throughout history and cross culturally. The brief history included discussion of American Indians including those from the Caribbean, Florida, and the Plains area of North America. It also pointed out that during the discovery of the New Guinea Highlands peoples, it was learned that all those tribes, which had been isolated from western culture, had transgendered people among them and a social position for those people.

This is evidence that transgenderism is not a Western European phenomenon



Dana Turner, Attorney

and the present transgendered movement should not be dominated by people of Western European descent. Even in the Reconstruction era, transgendered people were documented among psychologists of the era as being active in what were described as drag dances in the Washington, DC and New York City areas. Their dress was fully and elaborately described, indicating that these psychologists had a bit more interest than clinical in their subjects. It was also pointed out that many of these transgendered African-Americans were employed at various levels of the Government.

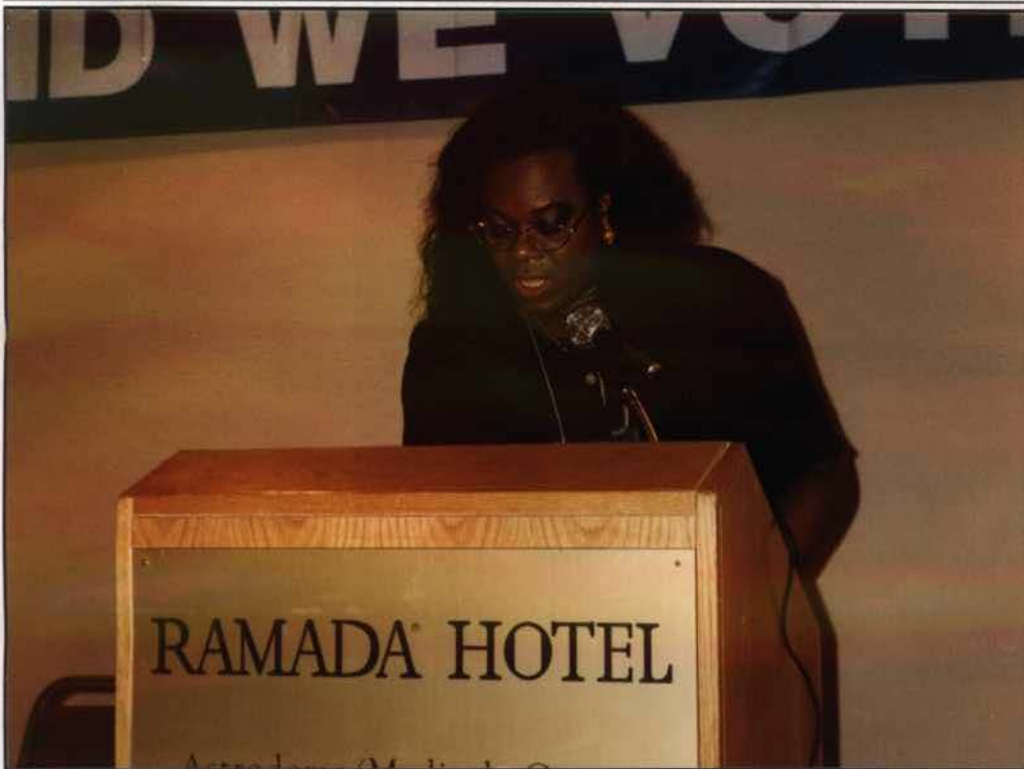
The next presenter was Gloria Wright, who is the past president of the Chicago Gender Society and the past president of Chi chapter of Tri-ess. Gloria pointed out that when she was coming out, 13 years ago, she called the well-known crossdresser's organization and asked if they accepted minorities. The response of the spokesperson was, "What kind of minority are you?" Which shows an insensitivity of many of the transgender organizations today, to the inclusion of people of color. Since that time, Gloria Wright refused to be intimidated by that upsetting remark and she's been elected to various national offices and offices in the transgendered groups in the Chicago area.

Gloria discussed how we, as a movement, should be very interested and very concerned with recruiting people of color and should be developing serious methods for doing that. She also gave an example of having met a person of African-American descent who attended a meeting at an organization that she's an officer in. And she was very quiet and withdrawn as a person generally. And through her work with that organization, she became an officer of Chicago Gender Society and is now a postoperative transsexual and active member of various activist groups in the Chicago gay and lesbian community.

She also points out that even after that upsetting remark, that very same organization eventually asked her to write an article for *Femme Mirror* magazine, which ultimately became the cover story for that magazine. So her point was that people of color have contributed greatly to this movement and they continue to do so, when given the opportunity and included in these organizations' goals and programs. She also reminded the gathered conferees that they should be careful of what they ask for because they may get it. Meaning that if you seek to include people of color in your organizations, you are going to have to tailor the programs and your activities to meet the needs of these constituencies.

As an example with this, she cited a recent vigil in Chicago for a murdered African-American transsexual named Christian Paige, which was participated in by transsexual men of Chicago Gender Society and "It's Time Illinois". It was a clear example of how organizations can reach out to minority communities and show their solidarity and support in the tragedies that happen in those communities. She also pointed out that there are a number of different cultural backgrounds that transgender people of color face, and different environmental conditions that they face, which affect how they relate to our current movement and the organizations that make them up. Religion is a much stronger influence in the African-American community. Domestic violence and super machismo are also prevalent in the African-American community. There is frequently less information that reaches those communities because it's not designed to reach those communities. There are fewer resources and frequently economic constraints that these communities face.

The next speaker was Elvia Arriola and she continued with her theme of the relationship and the commonalities between movements including the feminist movement. She drew a parallel in this case between passing in the African-American community and passing amongst transgender people. Passing was something both communities did as a survival mechanism. It also has some backlash in that it frequently takes a person from one closet to another. She said we had to be on guard against this. We need to persevere so that we're not simply passing in a society that oppresses transgendered people generally including those that don't pass. She also related a story



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about a television talk show in Spanish that she had seen in the wee hours of the morning that day. On that talk show, there were three Hispanic lesbians and three macho Hispanic men who were debating whether or not these women needed men in their lives. As an example of hostility that Hispanic transgendered people face, she cited the comments of one woman in the audience who told the lesbians, in Spanish, that two pieces of bread do not a sandwich make, you need a little sausage in between

there. This combined with great religious influences makes coming out for transgendered Hispanic people much more difficult, and with their own set of very special problems. She said there was a good deal of confusion amongst Hispanic-Americans between sexual orientation and gender orientation. And that confusion again leads to increased hostilities.

Professor Arriola also went on to discuss identity politics in general and said that it should not become a politics of hostility towards people who don't share your very same identity, because we are all made up of many other parts. She referred to her own life and pointed out that she was a bilingual person and in fact a multilingual person. She was binational, having been raised in a part of her life in a boarding school in Mexico. She was a law professor who had to be able to speak and work in the language of the law and yet live and speak and work in the language of lay people as well. She said that she had only recently sold her motorcycle jacket as proof that she too has a more transgendered persona than she's presently living at this point in her life. She described herself as being all types of people and said again we must guard against characterizing individuals as just one type of people, because none of us are just one type of people. She made a statement which was later suggested as the subtitle of this talk of this workshop, "For us to fear the other is to fear ourselves."

The next presenter was Bina Aspen, an electrologist and a person of African-American descent, who has a practice that specializes in transgendered people and in male patients. She said she has a large minority transgendered clientele who she feels are more comfortable coming to her, and she encouraged more people of color to enter health professions where they could have a positive affect on transgendered people's lives. She pointed out that many electrologists will not work on males at all, much less minority males. And she also pointed out many of the concerns that minority peoples themselves have with seeking health services from electrologists. She said that many are uncomfortable with health professions and the medical community generally, and their lack of resources frequently have not given them the opportunity to avail themselves of medical services. She said

many of her clients come to her after years and years of having used illegal hormones or silicone from off the street in black market, as we've heard. She also pointed out that some of her clients even come from other nations to have work done and want to have the work done all at once; and she refuses that. And those clients are frequently people of color. She refuses because it might be damaging to them and she refuses to damage their skin and body. She also pointed out that electrologists, like other health professionals in this society and nation, are trained on white models almost exclusively. The training methods were developed for caucasian hair and hair follicles and skin, and these techniques just do not work for many minority peoples. She pointed out that black hair is curly and so is the follicle and often an electrologist must be able to work within that curved follicle to be effective. She pointed out that Asian people's skin seemed to keloid more easily than any other minority group which she had worked on and that it was a great concern of hers.

The next presenter was Elena. As I said before, a person of Japanese descent. Elena pointed out that Asian people are frequently invisible in the American transgendered community. She commented that she travels to various conferences and events and people remember her because she's usually the only Asian person at these events. They introduce themselves and come up to her and she has no idea who they are. She spoke of the historical aspects of transgenderism in Japan, and used the theatre to show how culture is reflected and how the transgenderism is reflected in cultures through their theatre and language. In the Kabuki Theater, all the female roles have been played by men for many centuries. And that before that, there was an ancient women's theater where all the male parts were played by women and that theater is called Takaracuka. I was going to point out Takaracuka is a contemporary form. Elena told us how many of those women who played male parts are the heart throbs of adolescent Japanese girls and that is relatively accepted in contemporary Japanese society. She also pointed out that the Japanese language lent itself to transgenderism in a large way, because it made no gender distinctions in its use of pronouns and gerunds. In official polite language, one never uses his, her, she, he, and even Mr., Mrs., and Miss were not used, just the term san, S-A-N. So that in language and in writing one cannot tell what gender or what biological sex and individual referred to may be.

She also pointed out that the proper religion of Japan, Buddhism, was not as entrenched in secular life, she believed, as in the United States and in American culture. She says the law and civil discussions were not based on religion as strongly as they are in this society. There were many transgendered people that, if passable, were basically left alone. They were unbothered by society. Those who were detectable to society, however, were the targets of intense oppression and persecution. In modern Japanese society, boys and girls have very strict role definitions. As an example, in junior high, boys were required to take Judo, girls were required to take home economics, and school rules allowed no departure from those distinctions. Girls dressed one way and boys dressed another beginning in junior high school. Boys were required to cut their hair in a very short crew cut – less than an inch perhaps. And that she had cried for three days when she had to cut her hair upon entering junior high school. She said that Japan transgenderists are accepted in the entertainment field and that there is a distinct transgender presence in Japanese media and entertainment. She pointed out that the medical community does not recognize sex reassignment surgery or hormone replacement therapy in any way. The law does not allow it and that is why she felt forced to leave her country and come to the United States. She said when she left, she used many excuses. She told people she was attending graduate school or employment opportunities. But the real reason was to come and change her gender.

Employment for transgendered people is very difficult in Japan due to the lifetime nature of company jobs there. The background checks and security checks are quite intrusive, and so many

people who might be passable are detected and not hired. They do, however, frequently work in the entertainment field or live as housewives. She mentioned again the commonality between women's issues and transgender issues; women have very limited career choices in Japan generally, and this overflows to transgendered people who experience even greater persecution in the employment area. They have trouble getting serious jobs, professional jobs, career jobs. She said that sex education in Japan was very closed. Very little information was disseminated. No information on gays was given in sex education materials and absolutely no information on transgender people was provided. When asked a question regarding AIDS in Japan, she said that the numbers were severely under-reported to the point of being repressed. People really didn't know to what extent AIDS has affected the Japanese peoples.

As far as being a Japanese person living in the United States, she said that Asians are treated like other minorities, in that medical research was conducted almost exclusively on white people and frequently almost exclusively on white males. Occasionally sample populations will include African-Americans, but rarely Asian-Americans. And yet she pointed out the large number of Asians that work in the medical community in this country. Once again, this shows how racial discrimination takes a great toll on the transgender people of color. She pointed out the social restrictions that Japanese people and Asian society poses on transgendered people. How the importance of the family made it very difficult for transgender Asian people to come out. She said it effectively made them come out of a double closet because first they came out to the larger society, being dominated in this country by the caucasian society, before they would come out to the local Japanese community. In contrast, she says that her family was very supportive, and used an example of how her mother responded to the question, how many children do you have? Her mother replied, "I have two children, one son and two daughters."

Oppression cuts across all levels, was the consensus of the panelists. A lively question and answer discussion was engaged in questions regarding how to reach F to M's or female to male transgendered people, and to bring them into organizations. Additionally whether there was a misconception amongst transgendered communities of color that many people in political organizations were white and middle class and comfortable and not concerned with their needs. There was discussion on the differences and needs between the highly visible African-American transgendered people who many associated with the sex industry or living in the street; where they see them on street corners and how class differences amongst the members of the transgender political movement have alienated these transgendered individuals; and how we cannot allow that to continue in our movement and amongst us. This comment was reflected by a number of the conferees with reports from Montreal, Vancouver, and elsewhere. A comment was made paralleling the transgender rights movement to the civil rights movement from decades ago. That conferee stated that improvements need to be done at the local level; that was learned by caucasian people working in the early civil rights movements of long ago and we have to learn from the lessons of those people, so we can apply them today.

How do we reach transgendered people who are not from affluent or middle class backgrounds? We need to go to where those people are. That was stated repeatedly by both panelists and conferees. We need to make serious attempts to get antidiscrimination laws passed, to get masking laws stricken from municipal ordinances across the country, because it is transgender people of color who are frequently most affected by those laws and are frequently the victims of those laws. Those laws are being used to victimize them, sometimes more than members of other ethnic groups.

I commented that we need to educate our own community, our own transgender political community, beyond the stereotypes. We must not think that every minority person is of a lower social

economic status or background or that they cannot share in our political activism. We need to deal with our own discomfort with people who are of different class and background from ours, which is frequently the case with political activists of today. And we must get out of the comfort zone. Even our present language of the transgender movement, or language that society uses to describe some transgender people, has its roots in the communities of people of



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color. And it was concluded that the conference attendees should return to their local communities and make the inclusion of people of color a priority. We need to consider using gender neutral terms for as much as possible and it was proposed that we consider Japanese as the official language of the Transgender Movement.

Inclusion must not be appropriation. You need to be aware of the politics. In every primitive culture, and we refer to them as primitive cultures, they've all had transgender people; they've all had a place for them to be productive citizens in their society. Western culture has excluded transgenders and persecuted them. We need to learn from the primitive example, learn from those peoples of color, and carry on into the future.