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"This Above All... To Thine Own Self Be True. And it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."

• Shakespeare / Hamlet / I / 111



Michael Alvear

More on The Lesbian Intolerance of Dissent

Two weeks ago I officially became lesbian enemy number one, with my column "The Lesbian Embrace of All Things Ugly."

Between my email and direct letters to the editor, *The Express* has received the most responses off a single column in the history of its existence.

Most of them calling for my public drowning in a vat of hummus.

The controversy reached national proportions when the largest lesbian website in the world printed a rebuttal to my column, even though the column had not appeared on their site.

Perhaps *The Express* was wrong for publishing something unsanctioned by the ruling politburo of the lesbian state government. Maybe it should publish a retraction and re-name itself Pravda.

Or maybe it shouldn't. Maybe this paper should be proud that it doesn't think dissent is a betrayal to our community, as so many apparently do. Maybe dissent is a necessary component for creating dialogue.

I have a question for the lesbian community: Why do you treat dissent as stains that need to be rubbed out, not as ideas that need to be talked out?

Of the dozens and dozens of responses, the most outrageous attack on my column is that gay men have no right to criticize gay women.

What a crock. Male or female, we're all gay. And as members of the gay community there is not only a right, but an obligation to speak out across gender lines.

The crazed and defensive reaction to my column (some lesbian activists are organizing an advertising boycott against the paper) reveal the worst instincts of our community: To ghettoize ourselves. Oh, I am a man, so I cannot write about SHE.

I opened a generous, family-pack Chef Boyardee can of worms with my last column and without retreating or apologizing I ask one question: Why? Why can't we say what we see and hear and feel about one another? Why are we afraid to ask questions about ourselves across gender lines?

Should we just give it up, pack it in? Should we erase this notion of a broader gay community so that feelings will be spared and nobody has to answer uncomfortable questions, the asking and answering of which could lead to better lives for all of us?

What I wrote forced people to ask themselves questions about the nature of beauty, the nature of our relationship to it and to each other.

My column tapped into something important. Yes, it was filled with generalizations, *but not stereotypes*. Generalizations are, as the word suggests, observable characteristics that are "generally" but not always true.

It's "generally" true that gay men are

the majority of starting players in basketball, football, track and baseball.

And it's "generally" true that gay women are the group least recognized for their aesthetic sensibility.

There is no field of visual arts-none that is dominated or even the least bit influenced by lesbian artists or professionals. Fashion design, interior design, architecture, painting, sculpting, even landscape design, you name it and you will not see a lesbian influence to them. That's not to say there aren't gifted, even brilliant gay women in these fields.

It's to say that over-all, the lesbian aesthetic is too anemic for these industries to bother with it.

There are lots of taboo subjects in our community and I've broken the biggest one: A gay man criticizing lesbian culture.

Here's what I say to all the women organizing boycotts against *Southern Voice*, which also ran my column. Here's what I say to all the hateful letters threatening me and insulting me personally. Here's what I say to all the people who want me to write hand-wringing, mealy-mouthed platitudes about our supposed unity and cohesion:

Don't quash dissent. Engage it. The risk of writing about a provocative issue is to be labeled a provocateur. Why consider the harder questions I've asked if all I'm doing is riling people up, right?

The problem with exploding cultural land mines is that people confuse genuine ideas and dialogue for shrapnel. Yes, it's true, I could have written that column in a kinder, gentler way. But then, it wouldn't have provoked the useful discussion we so desperately need.

Besides, you can't be kind when you're making hamburgers out of sacred cows. Especially when you serve them to vegetarians.

Michael Alvear lives with Zoey & Zack, his lesbian Labrador and girlie-boy Vizsla. He can be reached at mikealvear@aol.com

The Express Stylebook Policy

For the sake of readable newswriting, the word "gay" in *The Express* should, when relevant, be interpreted to be inclusive of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, transvestites, transgendered people, two-spirited people, intersexed people, men-who-have-sex-with-men, women-who-have-sex-with-women, queers, homosexuals, sexual minorities, and people who are unsure of their sexual orientation, but think they might be gay. Here is an example: "Toronto's gay-pride parade is bigger than Vancouver's."

Why do you treat dissent as stains that need to be rubbed out, not as ideas that need to be talked out?

