

“Existing and Existing in your Face”

Hiram Ruiz and the Pedagogy of Gay Liberation Front in Tallahassee, Florida, 1970-71

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HIRAM RUIZ PROBABLY NEVER CONCEPTUALIZED HIMSELF AS A HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT FIGURE, and the historical canon concurs. He is not mentioned in any textbooks or works of LGBTQ history, but this is an oversight in need of correction. As a student at Florida State University (FSU) in 1970, he started the first Gay Liberation Front chapter in the South and changed higher education in the state of Florida forever. Ruiz’s story complicates the widely held idea of the South as a desert of queer activism and resonates with the memories of people like long-time activist Frank Kameny, who says that the unrelenting negative assault on gay people “took its toll not only by diminishing and eroding the self-confidence and self-esteem of gay people, but also by sapping the initiative for political organization and action.” As Kameny notes, gay people needed a psychological underpinning of positivity about themselves as humans to respond to the psychological and ideological assaults from all directions (Sears, 2001, pp. ix-xi). Ruiz and his friends did this themselves. They formed a community of support in an extraordinarily hostile time and place. They forced the administration and community at FSU to notice them when the clear institutional preference was to ignore LGBTQ people. My reading of Ruiz’s story will point to the significance of the establishment of a Gay Liberation Front for our understanding of curriculum and pedagogy in historical LGBTQ liberation struggles. This group was established in a hostile environment where no precedent for it existed, and its story shows the importance of Florida to the southern queer movement and the revolutionary potential of a small group of people in an educational setting. In the words of James T. Sears (2001, p. 58), “Stonewall was coming South,” and Hiram Ruiz was the person dragging it there.

Ruiz’s story also has implications for pedagogy, as the gay liberation struggle was explicitly educational. The GLF intended to educate straight people about gay issues. As Amy Winans (2006) has argued, students learn about sexual orientation in the world around them, but they do not learn about how they are “expected” to speak about sexual orientation the way they do about race. Therefore, people employ the dominant discourses they learn in the world outside of school, which can be quite hostile. One of the most important components of the GLF

pedagogy was to tell straight people that they were expected to notice and speak about sexual minorities. This is a crucial component of “transforming silence into language and action” (Lorde, 2007, p. 40). Queer pedagogy entails “decentering dominant cultural assumptions, exploring the facets of the geography of normalization, and interrogating the self and the implications of affiliation,” (Winans, 2006, p. 107) and this is clearly what the group was doing – the GLF was not assimilationist or trying to “blend” with straight people. They were deliberately trying to stand out and seek acceptance at the same time. Further, as the story of their interactions with a trans woman will show, the GLF members had to confront their own discomfort over what it meant to be a member of a queer community in which some people were incredibly visible and subversive just because of who they were. In addition to teaching queerness, they had to learn it. This is among the many important lessons for current activists and those engaging with queer pedagogy: while it is important to insist on the visibility of queer people and have discussions about the pros and cons of assimilation, queer people and practitioners of queer pedagogy also have to self-reflect and consider how well we are meeting our own ideals when it comes to people who subvert gender norms.

I use the word “queer” at times in this paper, even though that is not always the word that the GLF used – although Ruiz and some of the sources did use the word at times, and when writing about specific people, I always use the words they used for themselves. Queer subject positions are those that fall outside cultural norms and expectations in terms of gender and/or sexuality. In this way, it is useful as an umbrella term, because it encompasses everyone on the LGBTQ acronym. Queer is also a politic that challenges the idea of “normal.” According to G.D. Shlasko (2005, p. 134), “Queer accepts neither its exclusion from the realm of the normal (which would confirm the legacy of such a realm), nor any attempt to recuperate it into the normal (such as assimilationist politics).” Furthermore, “a queer politic asserts itself as both outside of gender and hetero-norms and also opposed to the existence of these norms and the structures that serve to police their boundaries” (Shlasko, 2005, p. 132). This is not to say that Ruiz and the GLF perfectly embodied these tensions or ideas at all times. However, the non-assimilationist politics of the GLF and their insistence that they should be able to express their identities freely within an extraordinarily assimilationist environment means that they spent at least some of their intellectual and activist energy on queer politics and engaging in queer pedagogy.

The life of a gay Cuban teenager in Miami in the 1960s – a city that suffered raids on gay bars and ordinances banning wearing clothing of the other gender – was not easy for Ruiz, but even more difficult was Tallahassee in the 1970s. After living a mostly-closeted life in Miami and New York, Ruiz’s first encounter with visibility was at a party with gay people in a small town outside Tallahassee. It was a liberating moment for him: “At that point in time, I don’t think I actually conceptualized seeing same-sex couples dancing.” He made a group of gay friends, and in 1970 they went to Mardi Gras in New Orleans, where he went to his first gay bar. He also visited Los Angeles and went to a GLF meeting there. He went back to Tallahassee and talked to his friends, saying, “This is what I came across, and this is what I think it means. We have to do this. And so we decided to start our own Gay Liberation Front” (Ruiz, 2012). He knew his words proclaiming gay liberation could “strike at the very foundation of a very uptight community” (Ruiz, n.d.).

The significance of this decision should not be understated. No other GLF chapters existed in the South at this time. There was nothing even close. In the 1960s, there was a tiny chapter of the Mattachine Society in Miami (Sears, 2001, p. ix). The Mattachine Society was founded in 1951 by Harry Hay and intended to improve rights for gay people. They wanted to

end the isolation that gay men often felt, educate gay and straight people about gay culture, help gay people become leaders within gay communities, and help gay people who had been victimized by oppression. The Mattachine Society was a male- and white-dominated movement and, unlike the GLF, did not focus on liberation, changing the heterosexist assumptions of society, or alliances with other marginalized groups (Sears, 1998, pp. 191-193). It faded away by the late 1960s, but not before it had done the important work of creating community and solidarity. The Miami chapter was disbanded in March of 1967, two years before Ruiz began coming out, and two years before Stonewall. The Stonewall riots of 1969 were an important flashpoint for queer rights activism. They were a series of demonstrations in New York City in response to frequent police raids of gay bars. Stonewall is considered the first time in the US that queer people fought back against state-sponsored persecution. Drag queens, often vilified in gay and lesbian communities even today for being flagrantly gender-bending, were central to the protest. They proved their importance to queer liberation in their courageous public demonstration of their rage. In the post-Stonewall era, coming out came to mean shedding internalized homophobia and improving one’s life (D’Emilio, 1983). Within a month of the Stonewall rebellion, the Gay Liberation Front was formed in New York City. A more radical group than the Mattachine Society, the GLF wanted to focus on direct action to liberate all oppressed people rather than focus on assimilation. The GLF held consciousness-raising groups to help members overcome their own sexism and racism (“Gay liberation front,” 2012). Ruiz participated in one such group at Howard University in Washington, DC, in the summer of 1970 that consisted of black and Latin American people (Ruiz, 2012). Over time, the GLF splintered off as other New Left groups – liberal groups in the 1960s and 1970s that agitated for political change, a more democratic society, civil rights, university reforms, and who often protested the Vietnam War – rejected the GLF presence at their events (D’Emilio, 1983). About two years after its founding, the GLF gave way to the Gay Activists Alliance, a single-issue organization focused on reform (“Gay liberation front,” 2012).

The FSU student senate recognized the GLF on May 5, 1970, but the university banned the group from using campus facilities, as the FSU student newspaper, the *Florida Flambeau*, reported on May 27, 1970. The GLF took out an ad in the *Flambeau* on May 12, 1970. The ad declared that GLF members did not feel guilty or inferior and that they opposed “all forms of oppression whether sexual, racial, economic or cultural. We declare our unity with and support for all oppressed minorities who fight for their freedom.” Homophobic reactions to the ad were immediate. Fourteen FSU employees wrote a letter to the editor of the *Flambeau* published on May 29. The printing of the ad, they said, was “dangerous to the welfare of all citizens” because the GLF “advocates the violation of the Florida Statutes which makes certain homosexual acts a felony.” Ruiz remembers that the university threatened to pull down the paper over the advertising issue in the face of an off-campus “campaign by business people to prevent us from having ads in the paper” (Ruiz, 2012). The homophobic reactions were not surprising. But what the GLF members did not expect were circulars that appeared on campus that stated, “Realizing that any denial of sexual self-determination is an infringement of basic human rights, Tallahassee Women’s Liberation and the Malcolm X United Liberation Front extend their full support to Tallahassee Gay Liberation Front” (Ruiz, n.d.). They also had the support of the student body president, Chuck Sherman, when the *Flambeau* turned down their second ad. He called for the paper to commit to freedom of expression and not be cowed by the prejudices of other advertisers, but the *Flambeau* defended its position (McMullen, 1970; Majors, 1970). A letter to the editor of the *Flambeau* on October 9, 1970 criticized Sherman for this support of

“perversion” and speculation that he might next condone murder and rape. Clearly, the GLF had much to teach the Tallahassee and FSU communities – although they did not seem extraordinarily willing to listen.

While the fighting over advertising and institutionalized homophobia raged, the GLF began having meetings. The first meeting was held in an apartment Ruiz shared with three other gay men. Ruiz recalls that forty people came, including professors and students. After that meeting, Ruiz and his roommates were evicted because they were gay (Ruiz, 2012). Unable to host future meetings, the group tried to get a meeting space on campus but were denied because they advocated violation of the Florida statutes dealing with an “abominable and detestable crime against nature” and because the university was unwilling to grant “tacit approval of the views of the GLF.” So the group held a workshop on Landis Green, an open space on campus, to “acquaint the student body with the views of GLF and to give students a chance to ask questions of its members,” as they wrote in the *Flambeau* on May 27, 1970, They wanted to educate their fellow students, right in the heart of the campus.

Ruiz and the GLF members were also being educated. When he was in Los Angeles, Ruiz met a trans woman named Angela Douglas, who then came to Tallahassee for a time. Ruiz recalls, “It was really a very challenging thing for us, because here we are in Tallahassee, we’re being bold enough to try to be out and be gay.” But Douglas was visibly trans, and “it was a very challenging thing, being out in public with her.” Douglas “really forced us to kind of deal with a lot of our own issues and stereotypes and hang-ups.” Ruiz says the group was not interested in conforming or blending in, but Douglas pushed them out of their comfort zones: “Having her there, we were going to be really different. It’s like we couldn’t just look like everybody else, but we were gay” (Ruiz, 2012). The GLF members did make themselves quite visible and made their non-assimilationist politics clear. They held love-ins and sit-ins on campus. They traveled to the University of Florida in Gainesville to speak to a group of students there about a variety of issues regarding gay identities and drew a crowd of 300 (Martin, 1971; Ruiz, 2012). They also held a protest outside an on-campus military ball and at the airport when Richard Nixon came through the city (Ruiz, 2012). They even put on a bake sale in 1970 in the student union. The bake sale table was elegantly decorated with candles, nice dishes, and a tablecloth. As Ruiz says, “We were trying to make a statement about being gay.... We weren’t gonna just do any old bake sale. We were gonna do a gay bake sale.” They engaged in other flamboyant acts of protest like throwing flowers at construction workers. They were “existing and existing in your face,” (Ruiz, 2012). The collective politics of the group emphasized flaunting, not blending in. This is consistent with the national politics of the GLF, an organization that wanted to emphasize ending all oppression. As the Angela Douglas story shows, this was not an uncomplicated project, as members of the GLF had to interrogate their own prejudices and biases. Queer pedagogy “challenges all students regardless of their sexual identities because it calls into question the process of normalizing dominant assumptions and beliefs, as it challenges instructors to question and to continue their own pedagogy” (Winans, 2006, p. 106). Furthermore, teaching identity politics is difficult because it too often focuses on assimilation and not upsetting the power structures or social transformation – in other words, campaigns that focus on the “gay people are just like you” message don’t upset the power of heteronormativity. And those strategies do not work with trans people, who are not “just like” cis straight people, in that they defy ideas about the gender binary and having a gender one is born with and identifies with throughout one’s life. Queer theory is helpful in this, because it “challenges us to move beyond rather than into the governing structures of available, and oppositional, designations of sexuality” (Kopelson, 2002,

p. 17). A queer or performative pedagogy “often *strives* to confuse, as it strives to push thought beyond circumscribed divisions – strives to push beyond what can *be thought*” (Kopelson, 2002, p. 20). The cis GLF members were more comfortable doing this when *they* were the ones outside the norm, but many of them found their limits in their interactions with Douglas, whose presence in their group was disturbing to them. Trans work is different from gay and lesbian work because it means redefining accepted ideas about sex and gender.

Ruiz extended his educational mission outside the FSU campus. In September of 1971, the *Miami Herald* ran a series called “The Homosexual.” Ruiz describes it as:

Just scathing. It was all homosexuals are all pedophile, prissy beauticians who have high-pitched voices who carry on. It was all the stereotypes, all the negatives. We have to protect our children from them. It was really just horrific. And I’m like, “What the fuck?” And so I contacted the *Herald* and I said, wait a minute. This is 1970! Ha! What are you doing? (Ruiz, 2012)

The *Herald* agreed to speak to Ruiz. The reporter writing the series did two stories about him, one centered on him and one on the movement. In his interview in the *Herald*, Ruiz stressed that identifying as gay resulted in self-liberation and was one of the greatest thing that ever happened to him (King, 1971a). In the profile of gay liberation, he talked about the group’s formation and deliberately included the stories of lesbians whose struggles may have been “less obvious but no less torturous.” He noted that unlike in New York, “in a place like Tallahassee, they still see homosexuality as a problem. It’s not a problem. Homosexuality is a fact, and society’s rejection is a problem. Making it a crime is a problem” (King, 1971b). The GLF, he said, wanted to take homosexual acts off the criminal statutes. At that time in Florida, homosexual acts could carry a 20-year prison sentence (King, 1971b). Here Ruiz’s queer pedagogy is clear: he is attempting to upend peoples’ beliefs about what is and is not normal, and focus on rejection, not identity, as problematic.

In addition to threats from the law and a hostile campus environment, Ruiz recalls a discussion in the state legislature about whether he and another GLF member should be thrown out of FSU. Their impact on the university must have been felt if the state legislature believed their expulsion was warranted – it went beyond the university itself, as had the reach of the GLF. A new chapter was being formed in Gainesville, Florida, with the help of the FSU branch (Johnson, 1970). There were other efforts to silence the GLF on campus, from tearing down signs to omitting any mention of them in the yearbook, despite their visibility (Ruiz, 2012).

The GLF members engaged in a queer pedagogy that academia had not invented yet. In their work, their visibility was their teaching, and their curriculum was the opening of gay culture to the wider world – moving from refusing to be ashamed, to actively being proud of who they were, as the bake sale example shows. They faced a great many challenges from bigoted straight people on campus, in the community, and in the university administration. There is a great deal to learn from the work of the GLF. The context for queer pedagogy has changed; it is no longer sufficient to say, “We are here,” because the presence of gay people has been firmly established, as states are legalizing gay marriage and outlawing discrimination. But, like the GLF members, many people who embrace gay rights stop short of understanding or accepting trans people – those who challenge long-held notions of gender identity. Educators and activists can push beyond “what can be thought” and call into question the assumptions made about gender and gender identity as part of their queer politics.

Ruiz says that while the specific group may not have survived, “it really changed a dynamic. I mean, it’s like the opening of a closet door. Not just opening but really swinging it wide open, and saying, here we are, never went back from there” (Ruiz, 2012). Ruiz and his friends became the role models they did not have and spread the movement to other places. The university and the state government were forced to deal with the presence of LGBTQ people, and feigning ignorance at their existence was no longer possible. A great deal of institutional and state-sanctioned oppression would characterize the following decades, but Ruiz and the GLF members at FSU lit the spark of liberation in an unlikely corner.

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