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COLORLINES The national newsmagazine on race and politics.

Issue #49, March/April 2009

A Fragile Union

By **Kai Wright**

> **"The electorate has forced us to take a look at ourselves. Our whole progressive community is going to be strengthened if we do that." — Dolores Huerta, United Farm Workers cofounder**

You can learn a great deal about the state of gay politics by walking along Manhattan's West Side Highway late in the day on the first Sunday of any June. Like the surrounding West Village neighborhood, the highway's promenade will be packed, cheek-by-jowl, with reveling queers who have just marched through the city in honor of gay pride. But you'll quickly notice something distinct about the post-parade mass crammed between the highway and the Hudson River: It will be overwhelmingly Black and Latino.

Travel a few blocks west or north, into the heart of the city's gay neighborhoods, and the demographics change starkly. The crowd suddenly turns lily white, as house music drowns out hip-hop, and muscled, tanned torsos replace voguing Black and Latino youth. The transformation is so dramatic that it begs the question of whether the two scenes are even related. As a white friend earnestly asked me the first time he ventured to the side of the parade tracks, "Are these people all *gay*?"

The visual and cultural dissonance of the world's largest gay pride celebration reveals a stubborn reality about gay life—and thus gay politics—40 years into the movement for sexual freedom: Once the marching and the chanting is done, the multihued cry against a universally felt oppression usually breaks down into deeply segregated, often opposing parts. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community organizers have for years debated whether that reality matters to their political goals, whether the community's divisions are meaningful enough to cripple efforts to create equality on everything from marriage rights to schoolyard safety.

Last year's ugly fight over marriage in California ought to finally settle the question.

From the campaign's first days to its lingering post-election recriminations, an inability to deal with race undermined California's struggle for same-sex marriage every step of the way. Throughout the campaign, activists of color, both inside and outside of the LGBT community, complained that its leaders failed to take people of color seriously and that they'd be punished on election day for doing so. Since the campaign's end, polls suggesting those activists were correct have ignited outrage among white gays and lesbians directed at people of color, Blacks in particular. As Stephen Colbert quipped a few days after the election, "The new conflict is gay versus Black, Black versus gay!"

All of it has left gay and lesbian Americans reeling. It's highlighted the fact that the more important word in the phrase "gay American" may well be *American*—people who are circumscribed and hamstrung by all of our unexplored fears and unfinished battles over race.

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California's Proposition 8 served up what is arguably one of the gay rights movement's largest setbacks ever—because it changed so much, so fast in a state of such great consequence to national politics and culture.

Last May, gays and lesbians across the country celebrated a historic victory when California's Supreme Court ordered that the state law defining marriage make room for same-sex couples. That made California only the second state, along with Massachusetts, to open up civil marriage. (Connecticut has since done the same.)

But just as important, the ruling came at a time when 28 states had constitutionally banned same-sex nuptials, representing a decade-long streak of losses of the sort not seen since Anita Bryant's crusade in the late 1970s against ordinances prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Bryant's hate campaign crashed and burned when it arrived in California, where Harvey Milk famously led a statewide movement to defeat an initiative that sought to bar gays and lesbians from teaching. The May 2008 California marriage victory felt like a similar moment, as though it harkened a new era in the gay rights battle.

Then came Prop. 8. As America woke up on November 5 to find itself transported to a brand new world, millions of gay and lesbian Americans felt like we'd been

dropped off on the dark side of the moon. Prop. 8, which amended the state constitution to bar same-sex marriage, had taken the extraordinary step of repealing rights already acknowledged. People were shocked—and pissed. And the fact that the initiative passed by a slim four points—52 to 48—meant it was possible to pin the blame on somebody. A CNN exit poll—now proven inaccurate—pointed the way to a familiar scapegoat: It found that 69 percent of Black voters supported Prop. 8, along with 52 percent of Latinos. It was clear from even this early poll that, percentages aside, it was in fact white voters who were the majority of Prop. 8 supporters, but that didn't slow the rush to judgment.

"I'm done pretending," wrote Seattle gay columnist Dan Savage in his blog the next morning, "that the handful of racist gay white men out there—and they're out there, and I think they're scum—are a bigger problem for African Americans, gay and straight, than the huge numbers of homophobic African Americans are for gay Americans, whatever their color. This will get my name scratched off the invite list of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which is famous for its anti-racist-training seminars, but whatever."

Savage modified his message with a celebrated appearance on the *Colbert Report*, in which he refocused his blame on older voters, 61 percent of whom the exit poll said backed Prop. 8. He opened the segment with a joke about having sex with Black men.

Savage was not a lone voice, however. Right-wing commentators delighted in trumpeting a Black-versus-gay divide, but there's little question the backlash in the white gay and lesbian community was real. Other gay commentators joined Savage in spreading the idea that people of color "voted overwhelmingly against extending to gay people the civil rights once denied them," as Andrew Sullivan reported in *The Atlantic*. Comment boards erupted in acrimony. Reports circulated of Blacks and Latinos being heckled at gay protests around the state. One man told popular Black gay blogger Rod 2.0 about his experience at a Los Angeles rally. "Three older men accosted my friend and shouted, 'Black people did this! I hope you people are happy!'" A young lesbian couple with mohawks and Obama buttons joined the shouting and said they were 'very disappointed with Black people' and 'how could we?'"

It took days for the No on 8 campaign to issue a vague statement that called for unity but did not directly address the race-based blame, and national white gay and lesbian leaders were largely silent altogether. But Kate Kendall, who heads the National Center on Lesbian Rights and was among the No on 8 leaders, began pushing back on the blame-the-Blacks narrative herself, posting a mid-November blog item urging everyone to move past pointing fingers. Kendall, who is white, now says the hasty reaction to the exit poll revealed a community all too ready to see people of color as oppositional. "The reason [the Black community] was an easy target," she bluntly explains, "is that there continues to exist among many white LGBT folks outright racism or at least a relentless otherness when it comes to people of color."

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Today, the notion that people of color carried the day for Prop. 8 doesn't withstand even a cursory look at the polling data. As several analysts have pointed out, the exit poll had little standing to draw race-based conclusions. Among other problems, voters were selected at random, not considering geography. Since in California, Blacks are clumped in a handful of districts, the poll can't claim to be a representative sample. Further, the state's relatively small percentage of registered Black voters doesn't come close to covering the 4-percent margin.

Problems persist even if you accept the exit poll's accuracy. A whole host of groups voted overwhelming for Prop. 8—including Republicans, parents with kids under 18, white Protestants and Savage's older voters. Slice the electorate in any one of these ways and you come up with a far larger share of voters who supported the initiative.

Then, in December 2008, a survey of California voters discovered that, while a majority of nonwhite voters supported Prop. 8, the primary factors were education and income. College-educated, upper-income voters of all races voted against the initiative; lower-income voters with no college degree of all races voted for it. And a January analysis by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force definitively settled the question. Researchers scoured precinct-level voting data in the five most heavily Black counties. They found that party affiliation and church attendance far trumped race as indicators of support for Prop. 8—indeed, after factoring in church attendance, the task force's researchers found "no significant difference" between Blacks and other groups in their support for the initiative.

So why was everyone so quick to choose race as the fault line?

"It was a preexisting sentiment," says H. Alexander Robinson, who runs the National Black Justice Coalition, a Black gay advocacy group. "I don't think that

folks all of a sudden have negative attitudes about African Americans because of one vote. I think that those are opinions that were there, and this created an excuse for them to bubble up."

Robinson and many LGBT leaders of color around the country have been deeply critical of how the No on 8 campaign dealt with race—or, more accurately, how it did not. "The campaign just was not done in the Latino community," complains United Farm Workers cofounder Dolores Huerta, a legendary figure in California's Latino politics who has been championing gay rights since the days of Harvey Milk.

Huerta and others note that Prop. 8's supporters, backed by the Mormon Church, aggressively targeted communities of color with door-to-door knocking and church-to-church campaigns, often dishonestly. The Prop. 8 campaign, for instance, implied in calls and mailers targeting Black voters that Barack Obama supported the initiative. While it's true he doesn't support same-sex marriage, he opposed Prop. 8. "If they're telling lies and you're not pushing back on it," Huerta says with a sigh, "of course people are going to believe it."

The complaint echoes critiques that have surrounded the movement nationally for years. "Did Blacks pass Prop. 8? Did Latinos pass Prop. 8?" asks New York City Latino gay activist and blogger Andres Duque. "What I've seen in the marriage fight for a long time is you can put a little money toward engaging the Latino community, but there's never actual engagement in terms of framing the issue."

Critics say this leads to disastrous moments like the "Conversation" television ad that the No on 8 campaign briefly aired. In the ad, one woman shows another a photo of her daughter's same-sex wedding, prompting the friend to admit she's not comfortable with the idea. The mother tells her friend that discomfort is OK, but denying rights is not. The spot has been panned for affirming anti-gay sentiment. But Tom Donaldson, who directed the ad, says it's also a problem because the mother's character was supposed to pass for outreach to central California Latinas. "We tried very hard to find a woman who looks Hispanic, but not too Hispanic—not to be too dark, not have an accent," he said. "And we did. We found someone who had a grandfather from Mexico, I think."

Donaldson notes that no decision maker he spoke with was a person of color.

"People of color should have been better represented in an ideal campaign," Kendall acknowledges. But she argues that the problem is a broad, structural one in the LGBT movement: There are few LGBT organizations led by people of color, and those that are don't have the resources to donate their top staff for months on end to a massive statewide campaign. That fact, Kendall argues, is the real failure. "You can't prepare for a hurricane in the middle of a hurricane," Kendall says. "What the loss on Prop. 8 helped to expose was a long-standing failure to reach deeply into communities of color—and within in our own community in terms of people of color."

Lawrence Ellis is among the LGBT organizers of color who saw the failure Kendall describes up close. He says that as he watched the campaign unfold from his perch in the Bay Area's grassroots, he got mad: "The thought came into my head, 'I don't want to be a part of the world they are creating.' " So he took off work and began building connections among the small gay and lesbian organizations already active in Black, Latino, Asian and Native-American communities. They looked at data showing Blacks and Latinos to be a trouble spot and rounded up big names, including people like Huerta, to speak out in ads.

When the campaign declined to air those ads, they turned their attention to doing get-out-the-vote work in their communities. "With two days notice, we got hundreds of volunteers," says Ellis, suggesting what would have been possible had the No on 8 campaign resources been better used. "Any campaign has to make strategic choices, but not building a true coalition, where you get to leverage existing networks—that is a fatal flaw."

It's not a flaw unique to California politics.

The Prop. 8 votes were barely counted by the time the marriage front had shifted to New York state, where Democrats have loudly promised to open civil marriage to gays and lesbians if given the power to do so. Last November, they gained that power by winning control of the state senate—until a group of conservative Democrats, including two Latino legislators, played spoilers by refusing to vote with their party caucus. Several political squabbles were at stake, but same-sex marriage was explicitly one of them, because Bronx Sen. Ruben Diaz Sr. was among the dissidents. Diaz has long been the state's most outspoken anti-gay politician, and in November, he demanded a promise that same-sex marriage would not come up in return for his support in the battle for leadership status.

After months of public fighting, Diaz and his fellow dissidents caved in, and the new Democratic leadership insisted they'd made no promises to him on same-sex marriage. But Diaz is certain to play a large role in opposing same-sex marriage in New York, and, as he's done in the past, he's certain to pit white, Manhattan gays and lesbians against his Bronx, Latino backers. He may or may not gain traction, given the number of vocal gay rights supporters who are people of color in state politics.

But if Diaz fails to racialize the debate, it won't be because the gay rights movement had the resources to stop him. Duques recalls the scene at a packed community forum where a uniformly white panel of movement leaders discussed both Prop. 8 and New York's future. "I looked around the crowd, and I didn't see any Latinos, actually. The crowd was Chelsea," he says, referring to the city's most well-known gay neighborhood, which is dominated by white men.

Ron Buckmire, a leader in the Los Angeles Black gay group Barbara Jordan/Bayard Rustin Coalition, insists, "There's no way that the LGBT rights movement is going to succeed if they don't have vibrant LGBT people-of-color organizations. No way."

The question remains, however, whether the defeat and the acrimony surrounding Prop. 8 have brought that point home to the people and the organizations that power gay rights movements across the nation.

"I'm 78 years old. I been around a long time," says Huerta. "Sometimes things happen for a reason, and I feel that way about this initiative. The electorate has forced us to take a look at ourselves. Our whole progressive community is going to be strengthened if we do that."

Kai Wright is the author of *Drifting Toward Love: Black, Brown, Gay and Coming of Age on the Streets of New York*. For more of his work, go to kaiwright.com.

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