

Denver Law Review

Volume 75
Issue 4 *Symposium - InterSEXionality:
Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Queering
Legal Theory*

Article 11

January 2021

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Recommended Citation

Nan Alamilla Boyd, Shopping for Rights: Gays, Lesbians, and Visibility Politics, 75 Denv. U. L. Rev. 1361 (1998).

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SHOPPING FOR RIGHTS: GAYS, LESBIANS, AND VISIBILITY POLITICS

NAN ALAMILLA BOYD*

INTRODUCTION

“How do you plan for your future together?” American Express Financial Advisors ask two “lesbian-looking” women in a recent advertisement in *Out* magazine, a gay and lesbian periodical.¹ In the same issue, Budweiser poses a sweaty bottle of Bud Light against a can of the same under the caption “SIGNIFICANT OTHER.”² Using images and language specific to lesbian and gay culture, these advertisements directly address a lesbian and gay audience. In the American Express ad, two white women lean gently against each other in warm sunlight as they gaze contentedly into the distance. American Express asks them to consider their future together—as a couple. In doing so, the advertisement links financial security to same-sex domestic stability. Financial planning secures the future for these presumed domestic partners; it links spending (and saving) to the profound “investment” many lesbian and gay couples have made in achieving the legal right to marry.

The Budweiser advertisement takes a slightly different approach in that it addresses gay couples as consumers rather than investors. Anheuser-Busch, the company that sells Bud Light, incorporates in-group language (“significant other”) and subcultural activity (sweaty “bodies” in a bar atmosphere) to advertise its product to gay consumers. The advertisement’s gay-positive directive, “Be yourself and make it a Bud Light,” legitimizes queer choices—particularly when the choice of homosexuality is accompanied by the choice of Bud Light.³ Also, positioning a bottle and can of Bud Light as a kind of queer couple, this advertisement, like the American Express ad, sells an affirming message to queers about the viability of their relationships. Through marketplace

* Assistant Professor, Women’s Studies Program, University of Colorado. I wish to thank Lisa Peñaloza, Ara Wilson, and Polly Thistlethwaite for their generous and insightful comments on different drafts of this article; Martha Ertman, Julie Nice, and Karla Robertson for their interest in my research and their invitation to participate in the InterSEXuality Symposium at the University of Denver College of Law; and last but not least, my students and colleagues at the University of Colorado, Boulder for their ongoing support and encouragement of my work.

1. See *OUT*, Mar. 1998, at 19.

2. See *id.* at 81.

3. Although there are important historic and subjective differences, in this article I interchange the terms “queer” and “lesbian and gay.”

visibility, both advertisements associate queer dollars (or consumer loyalty) with the legitimacy of lesbian and gay lives.

Mainstream marketing to gay and lesbian consumers is not new. In 1979 Absolut Vodka placed advertisements in the *Advocate*, a popular gay magazine, and successfully generated name-brand loyalty among gay men.⁴ Through the 1990s, however, advertisements directed toward lesbian and gay consumers have become increasingly specific in their representations of lesbian and gay culture. Advertisements by companies such as Budweiser or Miller Beer often appeal to queer consumers by representing same-sex couples or queer iconography rather than simply placing generic or crossover ads in gay and lesbian magazines. To many, these gay-specific advertisements document a breakthrough in queer visibility. Here, large multinational corporations affirm that gay and lesbian dollars matter. They visibly display the fact that gays and lesbians comprise an important market segment—a “niche” market, perhaps. Because visibility has been crucial to progressive gay and lesbian social movements, and because consumption in late capitalist development has become a primary aspect of citizenship, the increased visibility of lesbians and gay men, combined with the economic power displayed in these advertisements, seems to promise expanded civic recognition (citizenship) for lesbians and gay men.⁵ In fact, the equation that visibility equals legitimization and enfranchisement is so embedded in lesbian and gay culture that many activists see corporate recognition of gay/lesbian spending power as a key to the contemporary struggle for civil rights.⁶

This article explores the politics of visibility implicit in the relationship between the “gay market” and social movement activism. First, it examines the political function of consumer visibility for queers, and it challenges the liberal equation that visibility realized through mainstream marketplace accommodation equals or reflects enhanced political strength for queers. Second, this article evaluates the commodification of lesbian and gay culture in recent mainstream advertisements. How do multinational corporations such as American Express and Anheuser-Busch manipulate representations of gay and lesbian life in order to achieve gay and lesbian consumer loyalty? What is the impact of cultural commodification? To explore these points further, I draw examples from the early-1960s formation of the Tavern Guild of San Francisco. The

4. See Dan Baker, *A History in Ads: The Growth of the Gay and Lesbian Market*, in *HOMO ECONOMICS: CAPITALISM, COMMUNITY, AND LESBIAN AND GAY LIFE* 11, 12 (Amy Gluckman & Betsy Reed eds., 1997) [hereinafter BAKER, *HOMO ECONOMICS*].

5. See DAVID T. EVANS, *SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP: THE MATERIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITIES* 89–113 (1993).

6. See GRANT LUKENBILL, *UNTOLD MILLIONS* (1995). By civil rights, I mean state sanctioned domestic partner benefits, employment non-discrimination legislation, or the inclusion of homophobic violence in hate crime prohibitions.

Tavern Guild used queer economic resources in the 1960s to achieve limited political alliances and expanded civil rights without relying on a politic of mainstream visibility. The example of the Tavern Guild questions whether mainstream visibility is necessary for economic power to translate into political strength. Moreover, it questions whether the commodification explicit in mainstream advertising contributes to gay and lesbian community strength. In fact, the contention that gays and lesbians as a consumer group command significant spending power has instigated a backlash against gay and lesbian civil rights.⁷ By observing the impact of cultural commodification and posing alternative uses of queer economic power, this article suggests new ways of thinking about the relationship between queer consumption, political subjectivity, and civil rights protections.

I. THE GAY MARKET AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT ACTIVISM

In the United States, gays and lesbians occupy a "culture of consumption." Not only is gay and lesbian culture expressed in marketplace activities such as bars, restaurants, and theaters, but gays and lesbians also participate in a larger social and political system based on the acquisition and consumption of goods. In a society saturated by mass media and mass markets, twentieth-century consumers are not simply buyers of goods, as Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears explain, they are "recipients of professional advice, marketing strategies, government programs, electoral choices, and advertisers' images of happiness."⁸ Consumption has become a primary characteristic of post-industrial civic life. Following this, as sociologist David T. Evans argues, sexual minorities have become "citizens" of developed capitalism through their role as legitimate and recognizable consumers.⁹ In other words, because consumption has become an important part of contemporary political participation, for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgenders, mainstream recognition of their status as consumers legitimizes their political subjectivity in the eyes of the state. For this reason, Lisa Peñaloza, a marketing professor, argues that gays and lesbians constitute a viable market segment. Their marketplace activity should be of interest to mainstream advertisers in that gays and lesbians are not only "identifiable, accessible, and of sufficient size,"¹⁰ the traditional criteria of a market segment, but

7. M.V. Lee Badgett notes that biased samples yielding disproportionately high reports of lesbian and gay annual incomes have become a part of an anti-gay discourse. See M.V. Lee Badgett, *Beyond Biased Samples: Challenging the Myths on the Economic Status of Lesbians and Gay Men*, in BAKER, HOMO ECONOMICS, *supra* note 4, at 65, 66; see also Baker, *supra* note 4, at 18 (noting that the fear of backlash is often overestimated).

8. RICHARD WIGHTMAN FOX & T.J. JACKSON LEARS, *THE CULTURE OF CONSUMPTION* at xii (1983).

9. See EVANS, *supra* note 5, at 113.

10. Lisa Peñaloza, *We're Here, We're Queer, and We're Going Shopping! A Critical Perspective on the Accommodation of Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Marketplace*, in GAYS,

gays and lesbians as a social group also comprise a distinct consumer culture which encompasses both marketplace expressions (buying patterns) and identifiable marketing strategies that allegedly influence gay and lesbian consumption.¹¹ In this way, lesbian and gay consumer culture is dynamic, but nevertheless determined by and dependent on its ability to successfully identify itself as a socially coherent group, a social class.

Social movement activism is a primary marker of lesbian and gay community strength and cohesion. In other words, the community's definition of itself as a social class springs from its collective consciousness of and resistance to oppression. While there have been many modes of resistance, some are more recognized and remembered than others. A dominant mode of resistance in lesbian and gay history has been that of acceptance, integration, and assimilation—the key to which has been the increased visibility of lesbians and gay men in mainstream society. As a result, a politic of mainstream visibility frames the history of lesbian and gay social activism. Two early lesbian and gay civil rights organizations, the Mattachine Society (founded 1950) and the Daughters of Bilitis (founded 1955), sought to increase the visibility of the homosexual in heterosexual society by promoting positive images (“advocating a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society”)¹² and educating professionals and civic leaders such as doctors, lawyers and the clergy about the plight of “this minority group.”¹³ In fact, the post-1953 Mattachine Society identified “education of the general public” to “correct general misconceptions” about the homosexual as their primary goal.¹⁴ Later, the Gay Activist Alliance, a gay liberation organization, worked against the invisibility or negative stereotyping of homosexuals in the mainstream press.¹⁵ In January 1970, they raided the offices of the *New York Post* and demanded “positive news coverage of Gays in establishment newspapers.”¹⁶

More recently, queer organizations such as GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, work to promote images of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and the transgendered in the mainstream media, spe-

LESBIANS, AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: THEORY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH ISSUES IN MARKETING 9, 10 (Daniel L. Wardlow ed., 1996).

11. *Id.*

12. *See Purpose of the Daughters of Bilitis*, LADDER, Sept. 1959, at 1, 1.

13. *Id.*

14. The Mattachine Society split in 1953 due to red-baiting, and its leadership shifted from one that stressed minority-group politics and the development of gay culture to one that stressed a politics of visibility focused on mainstream acceptance of the homosexual. *See* JOHN D'EMILIO, *SEXUAL POLITICS, SEXUAL COMMUNITIES* 57–84 (1983); *see also Aims and Principles*, MATTACHINE REV., Jan. 1956, at 1, 1.

15. Terance Kissack, *Freaking Fag Revolutionaries: New York's Gay Liberation Front, 1969–1971*, 62 *RADICAL HIST. REV.* 104, 117 (1995).

16. DONN TEAL, *THE GAY MILITANTS* 134 (1971) (quoting Arthur Irving, *Gay Activists Alliance News and Other Events*, *GAY POWER*, No. 11, 1970).

cifically television. They organize letter writing campaigns by viewers, and give annual awards to programs that maintain positive depictions of gay, lesbian or bisexual characters. Mainstream visibility has long been an important aspect of lesbian and gay social movement activism, and advertisements by multinational corporations that depict same-sex couples or queer culture seem an important contribution to this cause.

Because advertisements directed at gay and lesbian consumers enhance mainstream visibility, many gay activists and entrepreneurs celebrate the gay market's ability to attract corporate attention. Sean Strub, for example, noticed in 1985 that there were no gay lists registered in *The Standard Rate and Data Service Directory of Mailing Lists*,¹⁷ so he founded a telemarketing company, Strubco, to assemble lists of potential queer buyers in a variety of gay and lesbian lifestyle categories.¹⁸ These lists were useful initially in directing queer products to queer consumers, but the lists grew to become an important commodity themselves. Once predictable buying patterns are demonstrated, gay lists sell for top dollar to multinational corporations seeking queer consumers. In 1994, for example, AT&T and MCI both used gay lists in direct-mail campaigns to successfully target gay and lesbian consumers.¹⁹ Moreover, research groups such as Overlooked Opinions and Simmons Market Research have encouraged corporate sponsorship by documenting the unique qualities of the gay market. In several early-1990s studies, they asserted the dubious claim that gay households have more overall income than heterosexual households, and they observed that gay couples, as "DINKS" (double income, no kids), are more conscious of marketing trends and, thus, more likely to be loyal name-brand consumers.²⁰ While others have argued against the plausibility of these claims, the enthusiasm gay entrepreneurs express toward the gay market evidences a deep investment in economic citizenship—the faith that gay buying power will somehow benefit gays (or at least gay entrepreneurs). Because advertising promotes the visibility and (allegedly) the legitimacy of lesbian and gay lives, it cements the relationship between economics and enfranchisement.

II. TAVERN GUILD OF SAN FRANCISCO

There are other modes of queer resistance, however, and other ways that queer marketplace activity reflects social activism outside the equa-

17. See Sean Strub, *The Growth of the Gay and Lesbian Market*, in A QUEER WORLD: THE CENTER FOR LESBIAN AND GAY STUDIES READER 514, 514 (Martin Duberman ed., 1997) [hereinafter A QUEER WORLD].

18. See *id.* at 514–15.

19. See Baker, *supra* note 4, at 15–18.

20. The biased quality of these findings have been well documented. See Badgett, *supra* note 7, at 65–68; Baker, *supra* note 4, at 11–20; Amy Gluckman & Betsy Reed, *The Gay Marketing Moment*, in BAKER, HOMO ECONOMICS, *supra* note 4, at 3, 3–10.

tion that visibility equals civil rights. In San Francisco, in the early 1960s, homophile organizations were obvious places for lesbians and gay men to assert their political strengths. Both the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis were headquartered in San Francisco, and they organized mainly around the problems of homosexual invisibility and medical misrepresentation. As mentioned above, they functioned as reform movements which projected positive images of the homosexual and sought to "educate of the public" about the unthreatening gender and sex normativity of the "sex deviant."²¹ Through the 1950s and 1960s, however, they drew only small numbers (10–20) to their monthly meetings, and although their monthly newsletters reached a larger audience, homophile organizations seemed unable to tap into the much larger queer community. They were especially unable to address the needs of the community's bar-going constituents.²² In early 1962, however, an informal Tuesday afternoon drinking society comprised of gay and lesbian bar owners and bartenders decided to band together more formally to protect themselves from continued police harassment. They met at the Suzy-Q, a gay bar on Polk Street, and called themselves the Tavern Guild of San Francisco. In a "thumbnail history" of the organization, the original members reasoned that "the unjust and intolerable laws, the method of enforcing them, and the seriousness of their consequence gave this weekly drinking group purpose and determination to build an organization which collectively could fight the discriminatory acts against our community."²³ They elected Phil Doganiero, a popular Suzy-Q bartender, as the first president of the Tavern Guild and continued to meet weekly on Tuesday afternoons at alternating host bars to discuss the needs of San Francisco's gay bar owners and bar-going populations.²⁴

The function of the Tavern Guild of San Francisco (TGFSF) was similar to many fraternal and ethnic organizations that surfaced in the

21. See *Purpose of the Daughters of Bilitis*, *supra* note 12, at 1.

22. In 1954 Mattachine Society chapters in the Bay Area totaled 40 members. By 1960 Mattachine's national membership had risen to 230, but this total included members from San Francisco, Los Angeles/Long Beach, New York, Boston, Denver, Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, and Washington D.C. See D'EMILIO, *supra* note 14, at 115; S.F. MATTACHINE NEWSL. (San Francisco Mattachine Society, San Francisco, Cal.), May 15, 1954.

23. LEST WE FORGET: A THUMBNAIL HISTORY OF THE TGFSF 1 (Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California Archives (GLHS), Tavern Guild of San Francisco (TGFSF) Collection, San Francisco, Cal.) [hereinafter LEST WE FORGET].

24. During the first year of operation, bar owners and bartenders who participated in Tavern Guild activities worked at the Handle Bar (1959–60), 1438 California St.; Lupe's Echo (1952–54), 545 Post St.; Keno's (1950–56), 47 Golden Gate Ave.; Chili's (1954), 141 Embarcadero; Coffee Don's (1950s–1960s), Pine Street at Leavenworth; The Sea Cow (1954–56) and The Cross Roads (1956–63), both at 109 Steuart St.; Cal's (1957–62), 782 O'Farrell St.; Dolans Supper Club (1940s–1956), 406 Stockton; The Paper Doll (1940s–1961), 524 Union Street; The Beige Room (1951–58), 831 Broadway; and Suzy Q's (1960–62), 1741 Polk Street. See *id.* at 2; ERIC GARBER, HISTORICAL DIRECTORY OF LESBIAN AND GAY ESTABLISHMENTS (GLHS Archives, TGFSF collection). Many of these establishments had been closed by the California State Alcoholic Beverage Control Board or the San Francisco Police Department's Vice Squad. See LEST WE FORGET, *supra* note 23, at 1.

United States in the early-twentieth century.²⁵ By pulling together collective resources, TGSF was able to cushion the economic hardship of its members, mostly small business owners and employees, while simultaneously protecting members from police harassment and/or the manipulations of organized crime.²⁶ Within its first year, the TGSF instituted a number of policies that helped protect gay bar owners and their clientele from regular harassment by the police and the California State Alcoholic Beverage Control Board (ABC) which issued and revoked tavern licenses. They established a telephone networking system—a phone tree—to track police and ABC movement, so if a bar was being raided or harassed TGSF members would quickly find out. They also set up a bad check list “to protect itself from its over-indulgent customers.”²⁷ Also, primarily due to the level of police harassment at this time, gay bars in San Francisco averaged only six months to a year in operation. Unemployment was a constant threat to bar employees, so the Tavern Guild set up a loan fund for its unemployed members, a group medical insurance plan, and an employment development program.²⁸ TGSF also developed a number of business practices that undercut the traumas of a competitive market. They fixed prices at reasonable rates and worked against unfriendly “rumormongering.”²⁹ A “leaked” story, for instance, that a particular bar was being watched by the police would quickly ruin a good business.³⁰

By July 1962, TGSF composed its first formal constitution, identifying itself as “a non-profit organization established to exchange information and ideas for the operation of our particular caliber of establishments.”³¹ Clearly, Tavern Guild members recognized their interests as business owners, but the function of the Tavern Guild exceeded a simple economic explanation. The gay bar, as a marketplace activity, had become an important cultural institution in queer urban life, so bar owners, employees, and patrons shared an (albeit unequal) interest in the economic success of the bar.

25. See generally JOHN E. BODNAR ET AL., *LIVES OF THEIR OWN* (1982) (discussing the economic progress of African Americans, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh from 1900–1960 and the measures taken to attain it); OLIVER ZUNZ, *THE CHANGING FACE OF INEQUALITY* (1982) (examining the evolution of Detroit’s ethnic organizations from 1880–1920).

26. See Bill Plath, *The Tavern Guild: A Record of Accomplishment*, Address to the Tavern Guild of San Francisco (Apr. 5, 1966) (transcript available in the GLHS Archives, TGSF Collection). For more information about mafia control of gay bars in New York City, see GEORGE CHAUNCEY, *GAY NEW YORK: GENDER, URBAN CULTURE, AND THE MAKING OF THE GAY MALE WORLD, 1890–1940* (1994).

27. LEST WE FORGET, *supra* note 23, at 3.

28. See Plath, *supra* note 26.

29. *Id.*

30. Charlotte Coleman, an early member of TGSF, claimed that price-fixing was one of the most important original purposes of the Tavern Guild. Coleman opened The Front at 600 Front St. in 1959 with the \$1000 settlement money she received from the IRS after they fired her “for associating with persons of ill repute.” Interview with Charlotte Coleman, TGSF Member and Owner of The Front tavern, in San Francisco, Cal. (July 13, 1992).

31. CONSTITUTION OF THE TAVERN GUILD OF SAN FRANCISCO (1962) (GLHS Archives, TGSF Collection).

The sheer popularity of bar-related socializing within lesbian and gay communities gave TGSF members economic strength. Because the bar functioned as a kind of community center, it engendered a great deal of patron loyalty—and a growing sense of itself as an economic community, a consumer group. With time, Tavern Guild members developed friendly relations with beer distributors, touring breweries and promoting their products at Tavern Guild events. In return, beer distributors began to support gay bar owners during disputes with the law. Charlotte Coleman, a TGSF member and owner of a lesbian bar called “The Front” remembers, “[Beer distributors] were behind us to fight anything that went wrong because they were making a lot of money through us.”³² She adds that the San Francisco’s Tavern Guild “was a great thing in the end because it got the government—the ABC and the police department—to leave us alone a little bit because we showed some strength.”³³ Because Tavern Guild members were able to control the spending power of this lesbian and gay marketplace, bar owners and bartenders found that they could influence the state institutions that policed them.

Fund-raising, as a result, became the key to Tavern Guild successes. In 1964, TGSF hosted a drag ball (a gay masquerade party), the Beaux Arts Ball, where participants dressed up, danced, and elected an “empress.” José Sarria, San Francisco’s first Empress and a long-time drag performer at the Black Cat Bar, an early gay tavern on San Francisco’s waterfront, remembers:

This was 1964, and the Black Cat had just closed . . . they wanted to thank me for all I had done fifteen, twenty years before that. Plus, the then leaders of the Tavern Guild saw a way to make money, so they gave what they called the Beaux Arts Ball. They wanted to name me, which they did, the queen of the Ball. And from then I became, I made myself Empress.³⁴

The Tavern Guild’s acknowledgment of Sarria’s community service developed into a “court system,” an internal government, whereby an election process, and a New Year’s Day coronation established an annual slate of bar community representatives. Today, according to Sarria, drag “courts” have been established in most large cities in the United States. Election festivities, as fund-raising events, net huge profits, and the elected “court” functions as a grant-giving organization, returning profits to community organizations.³⁵ Money garnered from TGSF events such

32. Interview with Charlotte Coleman, *supra* note 30.

33. *Id.*

34. Interview with José Sarria, San Francisco’s First Beaux Arts Ball Empress, in San Francisco, Cal. (May 20, 1992).

35. See Nan Alamilla Boyd, *San Francisco Was a Wide Open Town: Charting the Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Communities through the Mid-Twentieth Century 193–213* (1995) (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Brown University) (on file with the Brown University Library); see also NAN

as the Beaux Arts Ball allowed its members to promote leadership within the bar community, protect their own legal and financial interests, contribute to a number of charitable causes (including homophile organizations), and most importantly, intervene in evolving gay politics in San Francisco. Rikki Streicher, owner of Maud's, a Haight-Ashbury lesbian bar, notes:

The Tavern Guild was probably singly the reason why bars achieved a success politically.³⁶ Because a buck is the bottom line at all times. And the bars had commanded an enormous amount of money in terms of the city. So when they began to invite politicians to their meetings, the politicians realized that here's an organized group and . . . number one, they have money and, number two, they have votes.³⁷

Although Streicher jumps ahead of the story, the Tavern Guild's history provides an interesting case because in it the relationship between social movements and the gay market is reversed. Rather than social movements providing visibility which attracts marketing, advertisement, and consumer identification, the Tavern Guild represents a marketplace activity that, in order to protect itself, evolves into a social movement.

While the Tavern Guild, as a business association, gained a certain amount of political momentum, even authority, as a social movement, it remained ideologically distinct from homophile movements. Homophile organizations pursued visibility and assimilation into the larger society; the Tavern Guild did not. Both groups sought civil rights, but the Tavern Guild, as a representation of queer bar culture, denied assimilation as a political goal. It remained preoccupied with protecting its right to assembly—its right to maintain distinct subcultural institutions that were relatively free from police harassment and marketplace instability. In this way, the Tavern Guild was able to control queer dollars and shop for rights without relying on visibility politics.

The tension between "separatist" subcultural politics and mainstream visibility politics frames a difference in lesbian and gay political strategy that continues to this day. Like homophile movements, GLAAD and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), two of the most important national gay and lesbian organizations, rely on a politic of visibility and

ALAMILLA BOYD, *WIDE OPEN TOWN: SAN FRANCISCO'S LESBIAN AND GAY HISTORY* (forthcoming 1999).

36. One facet of this success was realized in December 1959, when the California Supreme Court held a law providing for revocation of liquor licenses of bars which serve as a "resort" for homosexuals facially invalid. See *Vallerga v. Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control*, 347 P.2d 909, 912 (Cal. 1959); see also Boyd, *supra* note 35, at 174-77.

37. Interview with Rikki Streicher, in San Francisco, Cal. (Jan. 22, 1992) (footnote added). Rikki Streicher was owner of Maud's, San Francisco's famous lesbian bar made more famous by the documentary by Paris Poirer, *Last Call at Maud's*. See *LAST CALL AT MAUD'S* (Water Bearer Films 1993). Streicher participated in the Tavern Guild through the late 1960s and 1970s.

mainstream accommodation to achieve civil rights protections. Meanwhile, the “court system,” a network of drag balls and coronations that elect local, state, and national representatives, remains outside of the spotlight of mainstream activism despite their impressive fund-raising abilities. With queer dollars raised at queer events, the court system feeds a queer infrastructure, funding community institutions such as hospice care, LGBT community centers, and queer performing arts.³⁸

CONCLUSIONS

Mainstream advertisements directed toward lesbian and gay consumers publicly affirm the economic strength of the lesbian and gay community. Advertisements depicting same-sex couples or queer iconography increase the visibility of lesbian and gay lives. This combination of strength and visibility promises to some citizenship and increased access to civil rights. However, there are problems with this equation. While research data depicting lesbian and gay wealth has successfully attracted the corporate sponsorship of lesbian and gay media and community events, it also has become part of an anti-gay discourse that lobbies against lesbian and gay civil rights. Anti-gay activists have used the alleged wealth of gay couples to manipulate a public fear of homosexual power and assert the existence of a well-funded gay agenda. For example, Colorado for Family Values used Simmons Market Research data in literature that supported Amendment Two, Colorado’s 1992 state referendum to prohibit gay and lesbian civil rights protections. They argued that gay and lesbian communities did not need civil rights protections because they were already disproportionately wealthy. “Are homosexuals a ‘disadvantaged’ minority? You decide! Records show that even now, not only are gays not economically disadvantaged, they’re actually one of the most affluent groups in America!”³⁹ Anti-gay activists have also used Simmons Market Research data to lobby against federal legislation such as ENDA, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which would protect gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and the transgendered from employment discrimination. While anti-gay uses of market research information relies on common confusion between “special rights” and civil rights, gay and lesbian civil rights activists have had to contest the statistics generated by gay consumer enthusiasts in order to correct the misleading impression that all gays and lesbians live comfortably in a \$50,000 in-

38. José Sarria notes that “we are now the largest fund-raising organization in the gay community in San Francisco.” Interview with José Sarria, in San Francisco, Cal. (Apr. 15, 1992).

39. Badgett, *supra* note 7, at 65 (quoting literature published in 1992 by Colorado for Family Values, a right-wing anti-gay religious organization based in Colorado Springs, CO).

come bracket.⁴⁰ Clearly, the transformation of queer culture into a consumer lifestyle problematically misrepresents the diversity of lesbian and gay lives; specifically, it misrepresents the need for basic anti-violence protections.

As the commodification of queer culture in mainstream advertisements functions to make certain kinds of lesbians and gay men more visible and, therefore, more politically powerful, it alienates others, deepening the gulf between privileged and non-privileged queers. Advertisements not only render invisible whole segments of the lesbian and gay community, they solidify social inequalities based on gender, race and class. As Sarah Schulman argues, the majority of queers are not represented in mainstream media images, and the false image of the wealthy white gay man breeds resentment.

This false gay man is so clearly not living next door, not your son, not Asian, not your car mechanic, not your friend, not your lover, not you. It is a mythical, eroticized, far-away Other who can never enter your world or your soul. It allows straight people a way to accept the existence of homosexuality without ever having to have their own sexual identity implicated by it. More importantly, they can pretend away the power they actually do have and falsely re-position themselves as under the thumb of rich homosexuals.⁴¹

Representations of gay consumers in mainstream advertisements often reproduce racial and gender hierarchies by positioning people of color and women (if represented at all) in subordinate positions.⁴² In this way, a politic of mainstream visibility reflects and reinforces social inequalities within the lesbian and gay community. As Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed note, “[T]he sword of the market is slicing off every segment of the gay community that is not upper-middle-class, (mostly) white, and (mostly) male.”⁴³ Clearly, as corporate recognition secures a certain amount of political agency for the social group, the group becomes increasingly narrow. Also, because mainstream marketers are interested in predictable and disciplined consumer groups, the commodification of queer culture tamps down its creative, and often flamboyant, critique of heterosexuality, racial inequality, and/or sexism. In other words, as civil rights get attached to a particular image of lesbian and gay consumption, how and when will civil rights protections expand to protect those who are not immediately recognizable—or those who are unruly, reluctant, or sub-

40. See generally Karen Engle, *What's So Special About Special Rights*, 75 DENV. U. L. REV. 1265 (1998) (examining the uses of the term “special rights” by gay rights opponents and proponents).

41. Sarah Schulman, *The Making of a Market Niche*, HARV. GAY & LESBIAN REV., Winter 1998, at 17, 20.

42. See Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay/Lesbian Market and the Construction of Gender*, SOJOURNER, June 1997, at 14, 14–15.

43. Gluckman & Reed, *supra* note 20, at 7.

versive shoppers? What is the relationship between queers and capitalism beyond the easy equation that mainstream visibility equals civil rights? What are other ways queers might use their marketplace activities to subvert heteronormativity and secure broad-based civil rights protections?

M.V. Lee Badgett offers one solution in addressing queer workplace activism.⁴⁴ On the job, queer workers can organize and press for non-discrimination policies and/or same-sex domestic partner benefits. Queer workplace activism also involves building coalitions with other activist organizations, such as unions, which can lead to the strengthening of worker solidarity and rights. Finally, queer workplace activism can affect local or state politics. Here, she cites the impact of Microsoft's Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Employees of Microsoft (GLEAM) on Oregon's Measure 9 and Colorado's Amendment 2, two state referenda aimed at prohibiting municipal gay and lesbian civil rights protections. GLEAM lobbied company officials to oppose Measure 9 and Amendment 2. They also developed workplace coalitions with African American, Latino, and other Microsoft employee groups, strengthening their overall impact on company policies. Badgett rejects consumer agency in the face of queer workplace coalition politics, and she positions worker rights as the key to civil rights rather than mainstream visibility or spending power.

Another solution lies with the kind of marketplace activism expressed by the Tavern Guild of San Francisco. While national gay and lesbian organizations such as the HRC work toward civil rights through mainstream visibility, subcultural institutions support queer culture in the interim. Marketplace activity that returns its capital to the queer community rather than placing its faith in the power of mainstream visibility—and its dollars in the pockets of multinational corporations—highlights an important political strategy. Here, lesbians and gay men use their buying power to support queer institutions and sustain fledgling and often fragile community institutions. Lesbian and gay buying power directed toward queer institutions debunks a liberal faith in “the system” and seeks, instead, to secure and protect subculture resources. A politic of mainstream visibility, on the other hand, works toward the incorporation of lesbian and gay men into the body politic—it believes that lesbians and gay men can achieve full citizenship by breaking through the wall of mainstream invisibility.

Visibility politics have played an important role in the history of U.S. lesbian and gay social movements. However, mainstream visibility politics have always been a part of the project of assimilation, and assimilation necessarily projects a disciplined as well as a race- and class-specific image of the lesbian and gay community. The history of the San

44. M.V. Lee Badgett, *Thinking Homo/Economically*, in *A QUEER WORLD*, *supra* note 17, at 467.

Francisco Tavern Guild illustrates that queer marketplace activity as a political tool does not depend on a politic of mainstream visibility or a desire to assimilate into mainstream society. Instead, it encourages queers to be subversive shoppers, willing to forego the attentions of corporate advertisers for the promise of sustaining unpredictably queer lives and institutions.

