Urvashi Vaid

'What we need to do is transform the mainstream, not just integrate ourselves into it.'

BY ANNE-MARIE CUSAC

Urvashi Vaid is one of the lesbian and gay movement's most visible political figures. Always provocative, she has distinguished herself by insisting that gay people share interests with African Americans, feminists, and blue-collar workers. "I have never been a single-issue person," she says. "I feel that I have always been a progressive person who happened to be working in the gay and lesbian movement."

Her call for a comprehensive liberation movement poses a challenge to a gay and lesbian agenda that, over the past fifteen years, has tended to restrict the energy of activists to a narrow band of so-called gay issues.

"Like the civil-rights movements that preceded us and on which we model our goals and strategies, we have reached the moment of partial fulfillment," Vaid writes in the opening pages of *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. "The system has adapted to our existence, but it still has not changed in fundamental ways. We are freer than we were in the 1940s and 1960s, but we have failed to realize true equality or win full acceptance as moral human beings. . . . The liberty we have won is incomplete, conditional, and ultimately revocable."

The straight community has rewarded the lesbian and gay civil-rights movement with "virtual equality," a state of seeming nondiscrimination marked by the coexistence of "two Americas," she argues. In the first, gay people appear to have access to government, and some semblance of power and prestige. The second gay America, in Vaid's words, "is much larger; it is the one in which most of our people live, dominated by fear, permeated by discrimination, violence, and shame." For Vaid, actual equality requires a return to the goal of liberation, of transforming institutions, economic structures, and cultures.

Vaid was born in India in 1958. She emigrated to the United States in 1966. She attended Vassar College, where she came out to herself as a lesbian and a feminist, and she is a graduate of Northeastern University Law School. Her social-service work has included a stint at *Gay Community News* in Boston, and several years with the National Prison Project at the American Civil Liberties Union. From 1986 through 1989, Vaid served as public-information director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and from 1989 to 1992 as executive director. She and her writings have been featured in *Out/Look*, *Ms.*, *The Nation*, and *The Advocate*. In 1994, *Time* magazine named Vaid one of its "Fifty for the Future," a catalog of promising young American leaders. She was the only out lesbian listed.

I met Urvashi Vaid on a foggy January morning in Provincetown, Massachusetts. She picked me up at the inn where I was staying and drove me through the resort town. Most of the shops on Commercial Street were closed, but we stopped to peer through the window of her favorite, the Marine Supply Store. "They have everything in there," she said as I squinted at a hodgepodge of umbrellas, lanterns, stuffed lobsters, kites, and ceramic plates. "Kids love it." Back in her truck, she waved, rolled down the window, and called out to several passers-by. I asked her if she knew the whole town. She said she did, and pointed out the homes of several close friends before turning toward the house she shares with her lover of nearly eight years, Kate Clinton, the comedian and *Progressive* columnist.

During our talk, I was struck by Vaid's ability to create community out of the small interactions of life. With her direct gaze and her warm, candid conversational style, she continually strengthens her liaisons with neighbors, new acquaintances, and longtime friends. These local communications, and their capacity to change strangers into allies, are the underpinnings of Vaid's grassroots politics.

Q: You talk about the gay and lesbian movement as transformative and redemptive. What do you mean by that?

Vaid: The redemptive potential of gay and lesbian sexuality is that it broadens and opens up gender rigidity. And therefore I think it can redeem heterosexual misery. I think a lot of heterosexual people are miserable. The more rigid the heterosexual scheme that they are living out, the more miserable I find them to be. Unless they totally accept it, and then they're not miserable.

I think heterosexual men are made miserable by their cultural conditioning to not express their love of other men, and to not express their softness or their weakness or their fear. Men are just not supposed to be afraid.

And women are made miserable by being conditioned to accept what you get, and not go after what you really want. Most straight women just can't understand lesbians because they don't even understand their own sexual pleasure. They just can't see it. They have no idea how hot lesbian sex is because the world is so set up around male sexual desire as being the only hot thing. They don't see how female sexual desire is seething and hot.

But in gay and lesbian relationships there is such a premium placed on pleasure, and such a premium placed on, "Are you fulfilled and are you happy?" We're always asking ourselves that in our relationships. And if you're not happy, you leave. Outsiders might look at that and say, "Well, there's such instability," and so on. Well, yes, and there's also a lot more honesty.

Also there's always this whole gender-bending that happens

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in gay and lesbian relationships. Men are free to be butch, and then put on a dress for a weekend if they want, and that doesn't even mean they're transgendered. They're just playing. We play with gender roles, we play with gender rigidity, and we talk a lot about sex, and therefore we understand our pleasure more.

One of the things I was thinking of when I wrote that gay culture is transformative was this notion that maybe we can help redeem the tired old categories of heterosexual relating, and freshen them up and give them new ways of dealing with each other and new possibilities. And I think we do, actually.

Q: Is that what's disruptive?

Vaid: It's very threatening. But it's also very helpful, because it's not about displacing it. I don't think everybody should be straight or gay. I don't think everybody should be gay at all, or will be. I don't think that will ever happen, because I think some people are heterosexual. I think some people are bisexual. And if sexuality were freed, truly freed, people would find their own comfort level with what they want to be.

If sexuality were freer, heterosexual people would have better relationships, because they would be able to learn and mirror and adopt some of the good things about our lives. Gay people, too. I think this whole desire on our part to marry, and to mirror heterosexual ways of relating, is about our own devaluation of the relationships we have with each other and how exceptional they are. I think gay relationships are really egalitarian, and they're refreshing in the context of the sexism of the world. We shouldn't give that up.

And I also don't think we should give up the sexual wildness in our relationships. I'm in a monogamous relationship, so I'm not talking about monogamy/non-monogamy. But there's a way that we, by being conscious of sexuality and ourselves as sexual beings because we're gay, keep it in our relationships and keep it really fresh.

Q: Is that what you are talking about in your book when you talk about joy?

Vaid: Yes, I mean pleasure. I think gayness is about pleasure and pursuing pleasure. And that can be hedonistic, in the sense of pleasure for pleasure's sake. Or it can be moral, in the sense that it's eros, which has a moral dimension.

By my use of the word "joy" in the last chapter of my book, I wasn't referring just to sexual pleasure. Too often heterosexual people see us as hedonists when we say "pleasure"—that we're pleasure-oriented. And we're much more than that, in my opinion. There are moral dimensions of pleasure which are about affirming life.

Harry Hay, the founder of gay and lesbian liberation, always maintained that gay people have a special purpose in the human family, and that in ancient cultures that purpose used to be valued as a spiritual dimension. I think he's onto something, so I meant redemptive in that sense, too.

Our relationships extend the definition of family. They don't

undermine it or threaten it; they actually broaden it and bolster it beyond bloodlines. Family has always been tied to blood, I think, because of the whole inheritance thing, the need to protect private property. And so, gayness comes along and redefines family beyond this economic realm of inheritance and blood into this other emotional and commitment and responsibility realm. I have a gay and lesbian family of friends—straight friends, gay friends, their kids—that to me is as important and strong and part of me as my sisters and their kids and brothers-in-law.

Q: And it has the potential to define family beyond national boundaries and racial boundaries, too?

Vaid: Exactly, totally, because I think heterosexual people are really held back by this enforcement of "your family is your blood"—the property-based merger of two families. And therefore, you have to start caring about all your in-laws and their in-laws and their cousins. It's this force-feeding of family that produces a lot of discomfort and tension within heterosexuality.

The friendship circles that two people bring into each others' lives are probably more important than their so-called family. They're devalued and invalidated, *friends* as opposed to family. Gayness defines friends *as* family.

And it also has a very community-minded definition of family. Gay people have a strong sense of responsibility to community that comes out of having to create institutions to take care of our own, but which is exactly the sense of civic community and civic responsibility that many straight people are bemoaning as being lost.

Q: When did you decide to become politically active?

Vaid: We moved here when I was eight, in 1966, so it was a time of great ferment in America. I think I was very affected by that. I always paid attention to the news, ever since I was a little kid. I vividly remember the 1968 convention. I was ten. I think I was affected by all of those movements and leaders, and SDS, and the Black Panthers, and Malcolm X, and Doctor King, very affected by Doctor King. I had a poster of him up in my room when I was a kid. I really identified as countercultural.

I think the experience of being an immigrant made me more skeptical of the culture I found. You know, in immigrant households there's a lot of criticism of the dominant culture. In my household there was—"Oh, Americans this, Americans that," with the unstated assumption that "in our country things are better and different." Well, I resisted that, too, even as a kid. I always used to challenge the chauvinism of my parents because I identified as bicultural very quickly. I love America, and I love American culture. I feel very much a part of it, and I love my Indian side. I resent being told that I have to give up one or the other. And I won't. I live here. I have a responsibility to do something about where I live.

Q: What convinced you of the importance of being out as a lesbian in your daily life?

Vaid: It's a fitting thing to try to understand how I came out, because on the one hand I want to say I feel like I've always known that I was a lesbian. But in reality what happened was I really didn't have a name for what I felt until I met a bunch of out lesbians in college. I looked at them and I thought, "God, I think those women are so attractive!" And then I had to start thinking about why.

In the course of discovering I was a lesbian, I immediately started doing stuff as a feminist first. In the seventies, any feminist was called a lesbian. I think people thought I was a dyke long before I was. At least before *I* thought I was. And anyway, for me the process wasn't like, "Oh, my God, I'm gay. Who am I gonna tell?" It was like, "I think I'm gay." And I was always political. So I was doing political work no matter what. And then the political work got more gay.

I just made a decision very early on that I was going to be out. I included my lesbian and gay organizing in my applications to law school. You know—where they ask you what you've done and who you are and why you want to go to law school. I mentioned it, and I just kept putting it out there. And when I told my parents in 1980, it was another turning point that freed me up from a lot of worry, because once they knew, it was like there was nothing anybody could do to me about it.

Q: How did they respond?

Vaid: They were not terribly surprised; they'd expected it. My mother was quite unhappy. She expressed a lot of anger and frustration and unhappiness and "you've adopted the worst of Western civilization" kinds of attitudes. My father was more understanding.

The turning point for my father, in my opinion, was when, almost ten years after I came out to them, he acknowledged that he had difficulty with my lesbianism. And when he acknowledged that, his difficulties dissipated.

They never pulled the big drama thing on me. But it was very tense, and I withdrew from participation in a lot of family situations for a long time, and I withdrew from Indian events. But I never stopped my political work, and I didn't stop being public.

Q: So you felt at the time that two of your cultures couldn't mix?

Vaid: Yes, yes, because I knew no other lesbian and gay South Asians for the longest time. I met one woman. The first Indian lesbian I met, I met at a women's music festival. She came up to me and she said, "Are you Indian?" And we were hugging and practically crying because it was so remarkable to meet another one. We thought we were the only ones. Now there is a really thriving South Asian lesbian, gay, bisexual movement in this country, and so there is a greater possibility of connecting back to my culture. It's been very good for me.

Coming out is a process of self-acceptance and discovery, and for me, coming out as a gay person initially took me away from my family and took me away from Indian culture, but it's come full circle. Before there was a real South Asian movement—so that I could talk to people about family pressure, or cultural issues, or laugh about particularly Indian foibles and jokes—I got my support as a woman of color from my black friends. That's the community that I felt I belonged in, and who I gravitated to.

Q: What led you to write *Virtual Equality*?

Vaid: Well, I was very affected by books that I read, theory books, feminist theory—*The Dialectic of Sex*, by Shulamith Firestone, in particular, *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir, Juliet Mitchell's work, and that kind of second-wave feminist stuff that came out in the early seventies. I was in college, and I just thought, "God, this is so amazing!" I would read all the underground journals. There were tons of them, mimeographed ones, and I just loved it; I thought one day I'd love to write theory.

And so, time passed, and in 1992 I was trying to figure out a number of things: How could Kate and I bring our lives together because we were long-distance; how to move beyond the work I was doing at the Task Force because I was feeling very intensely the limitations of being the head of an organization. There are institutional constraints, there are political limits. I was also feeling the limits of single-issue politics, because I'm not a single-issue person. And I think one of the contributions I have made in the gay and lesbian movement is to bring out how we are not single-issue people.

I left my job in December of 1992, and by March of 1993 I had a sixty-page proposal. The book is really what I set out to write, which is a discussion of how the process of "mainstreaming" yields us a partial kind of freedom, that what we need to do is transform the mainstream, not just integrate ourselves into it. Using specific historical experiences, I try to make the argument that pursuing civil rights is very important, but it is just part of a process of broader social transformation. And that we have to change values, change cultural institutions, change economic forces in order to have a society in which gay people are viewed as fundamentally equal, normal, healthy, natural human beings.

Q: How did you choose your title, *Virtual Equality*?

Vaid: Well, when I first started to write, the working title was

'We have to change values, change cultural institutions, change economic forces to have a society in which gay people are viewed as equal, normal, healthy, natural human beings.'

Margin to Center: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation. And when I sat down to write, I titled my first chapter "Virtual Equality." It just came to me—the whole notion of a simulated equality, virtual in the sense of computer-generated simulations of reality, or approximate equality. In very specific ways, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people do not have equal rights, and do not have the same status in society that heterosexual people do.

When I turned in my first draft—the publisher of Anchor Books is a wonderful woman named Martha Levin, a strong feminist—she said, "You know, this is really reminiscent of bell hooks's title, and we should think about changing the title, because I don't want it to be confused." Her book was *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center.* A lot of people have read it, and I love bell hooks's work. I think she's just such an intellect, and really, really, one of the smartest people writing about feminism. Anyway, that's when we decided to use the first chapter title as the book title.

Of course, a year and a half after that, when the book was going to the printer, practically, I learned that Andrew Sullivan's title was *Virtually Normal*! I mean, we couldn't have planned it worse. His is a perfect title for the argument he's making, that gay people are as normal as heterosexual people. But there's the undertone in that title that we're virtually normal, or almost normal, but not quite. I don't agree with that. In my title, "virtual equality" describes the state that we're in. And my argument is that it's as far as a mainstream strategy will get us.

Q: What do you say to people like Andrew Sullivan, who dismisses cultural issues altogether, and takes a very narrow, conservative view of gay rights?

Vaid: My approach is to say that I'm not part of a civil-rights movement; I'm part of a liberation movement. And a liberation movement believes that the causes or sources of gay and lesbian stigmatization lie in the social attitudes toward women, in the categorization of gender, in the whole construction of sexuality as something that is patriarchal and private. Liberation politics approaches the whole question of gay and lesbian freedom by saying, "We've got to deal with the holistic piece of where sexuality fits into the whole human being, where it fits into gender, and then race, and then class, and then ability, and all of the other things."

Whereas they would say, "You are never going to achieve liberation; therefore, the pragmatic approach is to achieve civil rights." They say, "We've been the ones fueling the civil-rights movement." I'm sorry, but it wasn't the Andrew Sullivans and Bruce Bawyers who were doing the scuttle work in the fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, and even who are doing it today.

The hard, daily grind work of organizing for civil rights is being done by people who have a very different understanding of themselves as gay than the gay conservatives do. I see people of color, gay liberationists, women who have a very strong feminist background, and AIDS activists who are really very skeptical of the economic system and the way that it has hindered and affected AIDS research. They manipulate it and use the capitalist system to their advantage, but I don't believe any of the AIDS activists that I know really believe and have faith in capitalism. They're just furious at it and figure, well, we want more research, so we've got to push the drug companies in this way; or, we want to expedite drugs, so we've got to attack the regulatory system. A dangerous strategy, in my opinion, but it's been necessary.

Q: How do you change the culture?

Vaid: On one level, we have to debunk the myth of gay wealth and expose the truth that when you look at the statistics in a balanced way, you see that the proportion of those people who are the middle-class or rich is the same as in the general population.

It's really important to counter the myths that the rightwing puts out with the reality that there are working-class gay men and lesbians; by and large most of us are in the same position as the average working heterosexual person.

The movement itself has to take a position on economic issues. Right now the gay and lesbian movement is outspoken for rich gay people, and not for working-class gay people. We don't necessarily speak for the economic realities of a large segment of our population that is struggling economically.

One example is the prominence of gay Republicans. That whole movement is about, "Yes, we're rich and we're happy." It's part of the problem with confusion in this country among middle-class people about what policies are really in their own interests. Capitalism works brilliantly to divide people from their own self-interest. So that working-class and middle-class people will identify with the rich. They will look to Ross Perot and Steve Forbes for leadership when those people have absolutely zero in common with the average working man or woman.

Q: How would a broad-based political movement form and how would it work?

Vaid: One of the missing links is that there is not a strong progressive movement in the media, or in the streets, or in the political world that is saying, "Here is why your interest is more connected to the worker in Detroit than it is to Steve Forbes in New York City." There are instead single-issue, balkanized movements, like the gay and lesbian movement, the women's movement, the black civil-rights movement, people-of-color movements, the disability movement, the environmental movement, and the labor movement.

I think that the New Left of the sixties really froze when confronted with racism and sexism and homophobia. It was paralyzed, immobilized, threatened, unwilling, resistant. Half of those New Leftists became neoconservatives. And I think the reason they did was because they were freaked out by people of color and women and gay people emerging, and everybody asserting their difference.

Todd Gitlin infuriates me. I thought, how lovely that somebody who's been sitting on the sidelines for thirty years pops up out of nowhere and repeats the backlash line about identity politics, without understanding, number one, what identity politics has given all of us. It's been valuable. It's helped a lot of us. Number two, without understanding that within every identity-based movement there is a radical critique of identity politics that's been going on for years! In the women's movement, in the gay and lesbian movement, in the black civil-rights movement. People are critiquing identity politics even as they affirm the value of it.

Over the last twenty-five to thirty years, each of these streams has been defining itself, finding itself, developing its history, articulating its ideas and visions in relationship to the mainstream. But what we haven't been doing in the last twenty-five years is recognizing that we still have a common vision, a progressive vision of a society in which the economic system works for the people, instead of dividing the people.

So, where I would differ with Gitlin is in saying that the emergence of all these identities was necessary. You know, twenty-

five years ago, gay and lesbian people were not as strong. People who were gay and lesbian did not have the kind of self-esteem and empowerment and awareness that we do today.

And in the process of bringing out all these ideas about queerness, you have an impact on gender, you have an impact on family policy.

Q: Has your activism changed you?

Vaid: Yes, I believe that. You know when you're newly out, or newly coming to accept yourself as a gay person, the strident activist tone puts people off. And, on my part, I understand that dynamic much more now than I did a few years ago, and I'm much more able to . . . not so much change my message, but change the tone or change the delivery so that people can hear it. You know? You don't always have to yell at people in order to get them to really hear you. But I also think that the other influence on me in the last four or five years definitely has been Kate—her impact on my politics and, especially, my ability to laugh. Which was there, but I took myself way too seriously. She really has helped me lighten up.

Q: Can you give me specific examples of situations that you would take very differently now as opposed to before Kate?

Vaid: Well, now, I still tend to scream and yell at the news when I hear it. I've done that ever since I was a little kid. I can't sit there. I'm like, you pig! But now when I do that, I'm also more likely to make jokes and poke fun at the people I'm listening to, rather than just be consumed by fury at them.

Q: So, what is your life like with Kate?

Vaid: Heavenly. It sounds so sappy! I am so in love with her. I feel like I've found my one true love . . . lucked into it. We met at a gay and lesbian conference in 1988. And our life is pretty much the life of two working people. We work very hard at our work, and our work is national. It's not like we get up and go to the office or a factory nearby. We have to get up and go to another city to speak and do our work. We have our little routines. We get up in the morning, read the paper, and have coffee. One of us works in the house and one in the space that we rent, called "the writing office."

I told you in the car on the way over here that I love January and February because the rhythm of these days is so peaceful and simple. Our lives change very drastically according to the season. Starting in the spring and the summer, Kate is just busy all the time. She's away a lot. So I really love our time like this. We talk politics all the time. We also love movies, all different kinds. On vegetative days we get action and adventure movies. Let's confess, we do that—*Terminator*, really bad ones.

We're two strong-willed babes, you know. We really are. It's a clash of Titans when we disagree. But we also have similar interests—art, politics, music. We don't read the same kinds of things. She reads fiction, I read nonfiction, primarily. We like different music, but we are interested in culture. We see ourselves as political people and our work as political work—in her case it's cultural political work; in my case it's organizing. And we support each other completely. I also get questioned, like, "Do you really mean that? No, you don't really mean that." We question each other and push each other on ideas. But there's a way in which Kate is my anchor. I could not have written this book without her constant support.

Q: What are your favorite punk bands?

Vaid: Hole. A band called Come. They're from Boston. I'm biased because my friend Thalia Zedek is the founder of it. I like Bob Mould, who used to be in Hüsker Dü, a lot. I like the Cranberries . . . the Breeders. I don't like Green Day. I don't like Veruca Salt. I think they're all posers. I loved the old punk bands. One of my favorite bands of all time was the X-Ray Specs, an obscure British band. Incredible—they have an album called *Germ-Free Adolescents*. That was an incredibly political album. The lead singer was Poly Styrene. She was sixteen. Incredible music.

Q: So you feel that punk culture is important politically?

Vaid: I do. I do.

Q: What is it about the culture and the music?

Vaid: Punk is a reaction to corporatized rock. Unfortunately, like everything that bubbles up in our country, it gets co-opted and sold back to us. Well, I guess some of these bands are so marginal that they deserve to make a living.

My idol, I have to say, is Patti Smith. I'm so happy she's coming back. She's a prophet. I relate to punk's angst and its anger and its criticism of the status quo. It's not pretty music, although some of it is very melodic and beautiful.

Kate has a hard time hearing the beauty of it. It's really discordant music. More than anything, she is a jazz person, jazz and soul. James Brown will send her every time. Motown is her idea of heaven. And Etta James. She's really adapted to the punk. I remember when she first heard Nico, she was like, "Who's this?" And now Nico doing "My Funny Valentine" is one of her favorite cuts.

Q: *Time* magazine and *The Advocate* seem to be pushing you to take a national position. Do you think you might return to the fray?

Vaid: I take seriously the responsibility that people have given me the authority and the legitimacy to be a leader. I think I am. I think I earned it. I value that people listen to the things I say. And I think that means I have to be involved and be striving to put some messages and some ideas out to people. The way I'm doing my work right now is that I work with community groups all over the country, who contact me and say, "We'd like you to come and speak at a meeting, a statewide conference, a town meeting, a board." And they are sometimes AIDS groups, they are feminist groups, they are student groups, they are South Asian, they are people-of-color groups, gay and lesbian groups. I think clearly there is a need for that kind of organizing assistance, technical assistance.

I don't want to lead a national gay and lesbian organization. I want to do multi-issue politics, but all my contacts and connections are in the gay and lesbian movement. I would like to do progressive work from a multi-racial context.

You know what a dream job would be for me? If Jesse Jackson would say, "Hey, Urvashi, why don't you become the national field director of the Rainbow Coalition?" That's a dream job, to be able to build a national progressive movement.■