

A brief request in the classified ad pages sets off a major debate on questions of race, sexuality, the role of this magazine in our community and the very nature of gay liberation. Here, some of the many thousands of words generated by a mere thirty-one.

31 WORDS

The February 1985 issue of *The Body Politic* carried more than 200 classified advertisements. They had arrived over the previous weeks and had been processed by one volunteer and one part-time staff person. Among the ads for homes, travel, business opportunities and political groups, a fun femme white woman seeking same and a young GWM who likes to be treated like a baby, there came this:

BLACK MALE WANTED

HANDSOME, SUCCESSFUL, GWM would like young, well built BM for houseboy. Ideal for student or young businessman. Some travelling and affection required. Reply with letter, photo, phone to [redacted]

The person who opened the envelope separated it out from the rest and, seeking guidance, showed the ad to several collective members. Some said it should be accepted for publication. Others disliked it but felt it might be published. A gay man of colour who has been a volunteer at *TBP* for two years, most recently in the classified ad department, said it should *not* be allowed to run.

Thus, in the ordinary course of producing a monthly magazine that must rub up constantly against the ambiguities of the real world, a major debate on race and sexuality began.

While everyone who saw the ad realized that some objections to it were likely, our existing policy couldn't tell us what to do. That policy, which appears on the classified order form in every issue, disallows ads which violate the Criminal Code, and which specifically *exclude* particular groups of people. We have tried as well to educate readers to avoid inadvertent exclusions, like "GWM (gay white male) seeks same," asking advertisers to consider if this is what they really mean to say. But only such things as "no blacks" or "no fats or ferns" have been prohibited.

Because the contentious ad wasn't clearly disallowed under existing policy, and because the full collective was not due to meet until after the February issue went to press, the ad was run as it stood. From then on, the protest grew. The volunteer most angry about the ad informally contacted Zami, a Toronto group of West Indian lesbians and gay men, and he asked that the ad, his reactions and theirs be discussed at the January

21 collective meeting three days after the February issue hit the stands. It was clear from the first moments of the discussion that the collective was seriously divided; the debate was intense, and no clear consensus seemed possible. Agreement was reached to arrange a special meeting on February 5 with members of Zami, Lesbians of Colour and Gay Asians of Toronto to discuss the issue directly before the next issue (in which the ad was also slated to appear) went to press.

In the intervening days, memos began appearing in collective members' message boxes. One of these reported on an informal contact with a member of Black and White Men Together in Atlanta, who had taken the ad to a meeting of his group. There, too, there was no consensus, even among black members, though all agreed the discussion should get into print in *TBP*. The other memos were sometimes highly theoretical and all far exceeded the one-page norm for such internal communications. Before long, the few words of that one classified ad had become the vehicle for a major internal debate, filling more than thirty pages of densely packed type, on racism, the role of this magazine and the even the nature of gay liberation itself.

The February 5 meeting did not go well. Not everyone on the collective was able to attend, and those who had favoured running the ad did not change their minds. The guests from Zami, Gay Asians and Lesbians of Colour around the table did not like what they heard, and by the end of the meeting were clearly frustrated and annoyed. Ten days later, a public screening at the 519 Church Street Community Centre of Richard Fung's video on gay Asians, *Orientations*, ended with a heated discussion of *The Body Politic's* publication of the ad. The overwhelming majority of the people there, white and non-white, felt that *TBP* had erred grievously.

Memos continued to fly, and on February 25 the collective faced a decision about whether the ad would run again in the April issue. The atmosphere was tense, and again no consensus could be reached. It's our practice to discuss issues until everyone can agree with (or at least live with) a decision, but when that becomes impossible, we vote. On February 25, we voted, and by a wide margin accepted a motion to *not* run the ad again until a new classified ad policy could be established. We also voted on a proposal that we apologize for running the ad, and for the offence that it had caused. Everyone agreed on the seriousness of the matter, and there was widespread regret

about the strains which had emerged in our relations with organizations representing lesbians and gays of colour. But only a minority felt an apology would be useful or appropriate. The motion was defeated.

What isn't regrettable is that this discussion has begun and will continue. We all agreed that it was important to get as much of it as we could into print, to provoke wider debate in the community and, in turn, to help us come to some firmer decisions about what our classified ad policy should be.

What follows are edited versions of most of the memos produced by members of the collective, as well as letters which were solicited from members of the community most likely to be affected by this magazine's approach to issues of race.

The collective

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"Sexual fantasy and desire is just *there*, like quasars or protons. ...it is not there to be morally evaluated and either glorified or condemned.

Once we condemn the desire we no longer seek to explain it; and once we no longer seek to explain it, we have thrown away a crucial key to understanding the social forces and contradictions which give rise to it."