

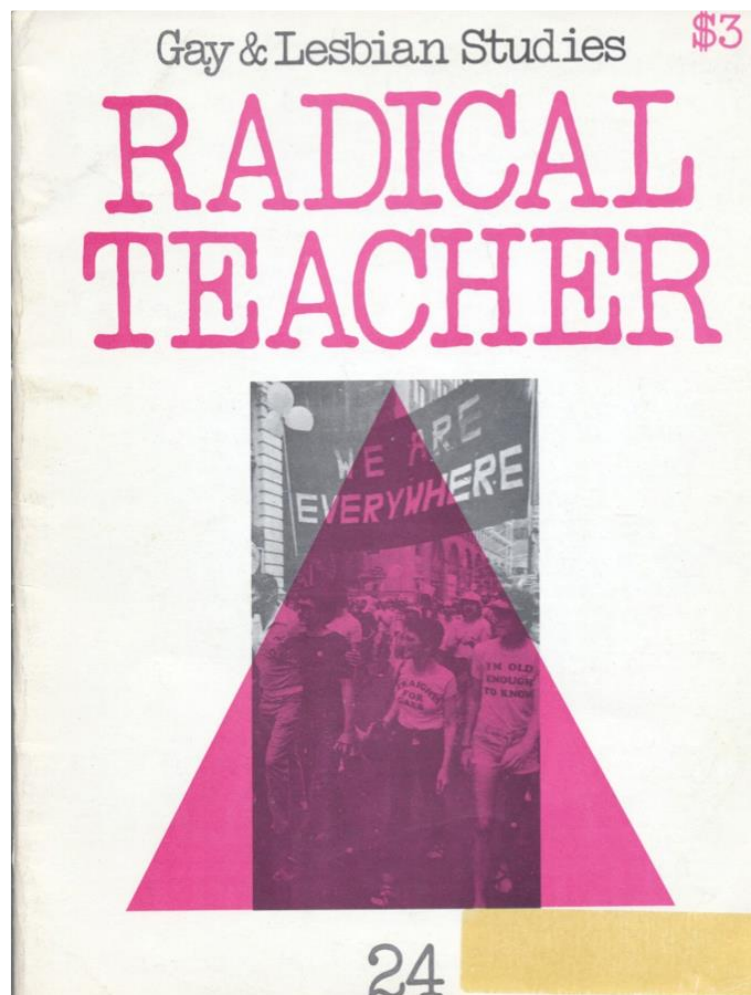
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

He Defies You Still: The Memoirs of a Sissy by Tommi Avicoli

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by Jack Weston



***He Defies You Still: The Memoirs of a Sissy* by Tommi Avicolti in *Radical Teacher* No. 24**

I used this memoir with good results in a second-semester composition class, sexually mixed and all (I think) straight, at U. Mass./ Amherst. Avicolti tells movingly and dramatically what it was like being gay in high school in the late '60s. I needed a short account to read in class (without threats of quizzes, my first-year composition students don't do assigned reading) in order to stimulate discussion and consequently themes for a paper. This was the second time I'd taught the course, which I devised, in which students write in two-week units about their own experiences (including friends, family, media) with sexism, racism, classism, anti-Semitism, anti-ethnicism, and, finally, heterosexism. The first time around, I had difficulty with the unit on heterosexism, probably because I was nervous with it and so put it off till the end, when we were rushed. This time I took it up third (next time, I'll put it second, right after sexism, because of all the connections), and after defining the new topic, sternly limiting our concerns to examining anti-social attitudes, behavior, and institutions (i.e., no attacks on homosexuals or defenses of homophobia), and telling something of my own history of and struggles against homophobia, I read Avicolti's memoir in three stages, with pauses for discussion.

There was lots of it, thoughtful, humane, and self-searching, mainly because many of my students hadn't thought before about the sufferings of young gays. I asked them to write not just a confessional but a useful paper about (1) an aspect of their own or a friend's homophobia, (2) an analysis of a heterosexist incident or social or cultural phenomenon, or (3) an explanation of how the writer avoided homophobia. I offered an alternative topic for students uncomfortable with the subject. But all twenty of the papers were about homophobia, and most were much better than those on the other subjects of the course - although about half appended notes asking me not to read the paper aloud in class.

I received the distinct impression that most of my students welcomed the chance to write about a heretofore suppressed subject - there was a kind of outpouring. Several papers were most gratifying: moving, honest, significant; three of these were about reactions to discovering that a friend or relative was gay or lesbian. Next time, I'll find short pieces like Avicolti's to read with the other units.



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