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The Gay Rights Movement Goes to the Mall: Envisioning an Anarchist Alternative to Queer Political Co-optation

B Y T O M T H O M S O N

Part I

Our dreams of liberation, our vision of a society free of homophobia and sexist oppression have been quietly stolen by our well-connected, privileged leaders in the gay rights movement. In their place, we are handed an altogether different vision, that of a homogenous, affluent "Queer Nation" in which our identities and empowerment are commodities directly connected to our power as consumers, and through which we will all assume our

rightful place at the table of the American dream. This goal is incredibly troubling, and not only because it has absolutely no grounding in the harsh realities we face in a capitalist political economy rigidly organized in along hierarchies of overlapping systems of control and repression. But how did a political and social movement with such revolutionary potential and radical beginnings go so completely wrong?

A quick overview of the guiding princi-

ples and strategies of the largest, most visible queer political organizations in this country, among them the Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, is very instructive in charting the course of the movement's descent into harmless co-optation. With the simultaneous emergence of the AIDS epidemic and of the fundamentalist Christian backlash against queer empowerment in the early 1980s as its historical context, these prominent gay rights organizations have gradually adopted an "integrationist" approach that seeks to fully assimilate queer people into the American political and social environment. The foundations of this activist project are:

intensive lobbying of local, state, and federal governments, with the goal of gaining legal concessions such as the strengthening of hate-crimes laws, the passage of laws prohibiting anti-queer discrimination in employment and housing, and legal recognition of queer domestic partnership;

building alliances with liberal politicians and government officials in both the Democratic and, amazingly, the Republican parties;

Do the victories won through non-confrontational, electoral activism really represent progress for the vast majority of queer people in this society?

a campaign to convince the heterosexual majority that queer people are decidedly NOT deviants or a threat to prevailing notions of patriarchal social hierarchy—that we are "just like them"—as a response to specific political provocations (the public relations efforts designed to oppose anti-queer ballot initiatives or laws, for example) and as part a broader

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An Interview With Alix Olson

B Y F R A N C I S C A O Y O G O A

Alix Olson, a nationally acclaimed slam poet, has an uncanny knack for captivating and challenging her audiences with her unique brand of humor, political consciousness and intellect. Raised in a conservative steel town in Pennsylvania, Alix has long been subverting societal conventions. Upon graduating from Wesleyan University, she journeyed to New York City in pursuit of a livelihood in the arts. Alix ended up performing as a slam poet.

Slam poetry truly embodies the essence of an egalitarian art form. On a stage, the slam poets perform their work in front of a live audience. The audience then votes on which artists were their favorites. This is a world in which the value of a poem is not determined by bookish literary critics, rather, the value of a piece is determined by those folks who show up to hear the performances.

Still in her twenties, Alix's list of accomplishments are impressive. The winner of numerous spoken-word contests, Alix has journeyed throughout the nation performing at a wide range of local clubs, theaters, colleges, and events. The featured Cultural Artist at Amsterdam's Gay Games, Alix has also appeared at Harlem's Apollo Theatre, the Lambda literary conference and the National Lesbian Summit. The talented poet and activist has shared the stage with a cast of characters including Meryl Streep, Queen Latifah and Michael Moore. She currently resides in New York City where she and her partner Neeve run "Feed the Fire Productions".

I recently caught up with Alix to discuss her work, activism, transgender issues, and views on the status of the queer movement.

FO.Your work tackles issues not usually discussed in "polite" conversation – LGBTI issues, feminism, the hyper-consumerism of modern-day capitalism and more. Critics oftentimes charge that you are too "in-your-face" about your views. How would you respond to their charge?

AO.I think I became literally sick with the amount of sadism generated in this society. I guess I am just unwilling to ingest it all, without having a chance to externalize it. If we don't speak to the degradation, to the com-

mercialism, to the lack of alternative voices, it will become so sub-textual that we will cease to notice. I already always have to remind myself to notice things; it becomes such a part of our collective social psyche.

People always ask how I can be so angry and still find humor in life. Somehow I have never seen them as opposites, and actually find them to be great complements. We put up with so much crap we deserve to laugh.

I guess "in your face" is a label that is given to people who are interested in fighting back. It's a way to make me feel too loud, too crazy and too over-the-top. I would suggest we charge Walmart, banks, car commercials, Sexism, and Police Brutality with being too "in our faces".

FO.Many folks in the transgender community have been deeply moved by your poem "Gender Games" which addresses the oppressive nature of prevailing strict, rigid gender roles. Can you discuss what your impetus was to write this piece?

AO.Neeve, who is the Feed the Fire co-pilot, co-wrote that piece with me. It was originally inspired by her growing-up experiences as a kid who identified with boy culture and as an adult who is constantly being told she is in the wrong bathroom. We are always being exposed to the stories and struggles of gender transgressives in our community, and in our audience specifically. I think feminism without gender transgressive dialogue, action, living (and vice versa) is pretty futile. I also think that Neeve and I are really interested in the idea of bodies, what they represent, what kinds of signifiers have been forced upon various body parts. "Gender Game" is about validating, and thanking gender transgressors everywhere. Gender risktakers are helping so many people who don't recognize it. We wanted to point to their courage.

FO.Much of your work rails against the current economic system - which concentrates wealth and power in increasingly few hands. Can you discuss exactly what your views are on the current global and domestic economic order? What alternatives do you envi-

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Under-reported News that affects queer communities worldwide!

COMPILED BY ADAM DAVIS

Louisiana Courts Prove: The State Can Regulate Sex!

On Thursday, March 28, the Louisiana Supreme Court upheld a 200-year-old law that prohibits sodomy. Louisiana is one of 13 states in the U.S. that prohibits what it calls "sodomy" among consenting adults. This ruling is just another example of the rights that U.S. citizens do not enjoy, and the right of state-rule that our government enjoys on a daily basis. Southern queer advocates vow to challenge the ruling in a lower court.

Reported by Jennifer Christensen from Gay.com

U.S. government believes that some September 11th victims have more rights than others

As if you needed another reason to question the legitimacy of our government, the U.S. government has set heterosexual partners of victims and survivors of September 11 as a priority in their federal compensation program. The U.S. Justice Department issued a statement on March 7, which excludes same-gender partners from federal compensation, unless the particular state that the person is a resident includes same-gender partners in its probate laws. At this point, such domestic partner language only exists in Hawaii and Vermont.

Reported by Rhonda Smith from the Washington Blade

Queers now not only have a market, but we also have a corporate sponsor!

Pepsi-Cola Co. is the first soft drink to target what the Gay Financial Network calls, the "gay market." While Pepsi is now interested in storming the gay market in the United States, it has already begun to target Canadian queer people on the 24-hour gay network, "PrideVision." While Pepsi is now using mainstream commercials, Richard Burjaw, Pepsi-Cola Canada's director of

marketing says that it's a definite possibility that Pepsi would invest in gay-specific commercials! As if I thought that my sexuality could ever be put up for sale!

Reported by Mike Wilke from the Gay Financial Network.

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cultural politics (the appearance of "normal" images of non-threatening, predominantly white and middle-class queer images in mass media entertainment programming).

Accordingly, the contemporary gay rights movement has avoided the opportunity to advance any substantive critique of either corporate capitalism or the power of the state. Instead, the movement has consciously chosen to align itself with the "progressive" factions of the State and corporate America in order, one presumes, to build and safeguard a political power base.

Judging this strategy strictly on the basis of its own logic and merits, the results are mixed at best. Do the victories won through non-confrontational, electoral activism really represent progress for the vast majority of queer people in this society? A variety of realities suggest that such efforts do not. The hate-crimes laws and insurance benefits that constitute the focus of mainstream queer activism have done nothing to stem the dramatic increase in reported acts of

homophobic violence. Nor has the growing public acceptance and marketability of queer celebrities served to effectively counteract the resurgence of well-funded reactionary anti-queer organizing within the religious far right. Quite honestly, the lived experience of intimidation, harassment, and violence that brutally shapes the lives of the most vulnerable and least visible segments of queer society-queer youth and poor and working class queers-proves that the organizing tactics and priorities of mainstream queer political groups have resoundingly failed. This failure is the product of internal tensions and contradictions within the gay rights movement, contradictions that boil down to the fundamental incompatibility of a liberation struggle with accommodation to an exploitative, violently oppressive political system and economy.

The Trap of Statist Solutions

Again, the non-confrontational activism of mainstream queer groups, replete with tireless fundraising and incessant lobbying of Congress and state governments, has yielded some concrete results, including the landmark passage of a "civil union" bill in Vermont last year. But the scope and effectiveness of these gains are severely limited for reasons that call the very logic of appealing to

state authority as an agent for social change into question. The high priority attached to electoral politics by groups such as the Human Rights Campaign is especially problematic. Even with all of the money and activists' labor devoted to promoting largely symbolic legislation outlawing some superficial forms of discrimination against queers, the organizational strength of anti-queer churches and groups such as Focus on the Family has managed to work even more effectively within the contours of state power. Numerous states have either overturned anti-discrimination laws or, at the behest of homophobic political lobbying and ultra-conservative politicians, passed overtly homophobic laws throughout the 1990s.

The limitations of state power in protecting the physical safety and dignity of queer people become even clearer when you consider the nature of most homophobic violence and oppression. The state of declared political and cultural war against queer people imposed by the far right is paralleled by an even more dangerous undeclared war being waged against queer people in the streets, in schools, and often within the very institutions of state power, especially the prison system. Over 1,400 "hate crimes" against

queer people were reported to the FBI in 1998, a figure that is unquestionably much larger when you take into account the number of violent acts never reported to the police and the narrow, legalistic definitions of hate crimes utilized by the police and prosecutors. The situation for queer youth is especially dangerous; neither law enforcement agencies nor school administrators have shown the slightest inclination to prevent the systematic intimidation and violence queer youth face in virtually all secondary schools. Working within "the system" on the system's terms has failed, in the most spectacular and absolute way imaginable; to protect queer people from the most devastating assaults we face in a homophobic society. This failure should force us as radical activists to rethink our dependence upon even the "progressive" wing of the state.

Tom Thomson is an activist based in Gainesville, Florida. He would love feedback on this article, and please feel free to contact him at xsomeshtx@hotmail.com, or by snail mail c/o the Onward Collective.



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Alix Olson

sion?

AO: Well, I'm a Zinn-head on this one. (Reference to Howard Zinn, author of numerous books including the invaluable "A People's History of the United States"). I believe that money in pockets has been almost the sole signifier of how our global history has been defined. I am attempting to find hope for the future, and was beginning to - with Nader's run for office, with all of the WTO protests, with an increasing awareness of how top moneymakers really transgress national boundaries at this point. I hope that September 11 will be a way for us to remember what matters in these short lives, and not a way for us to be suckered into buying more red, white, and blue crap.

I can think of a million alternatives, but I don't feel particularly qualified to outline 'em. I do know that there are many folks on the Left whose passion and career are to come up with economic alternatives and I feel that we are blessed to have people across the board working in different areas. It's not that these ideas,

alternatives are not available- it's that people in charge (read: government run by corporate lobbyists) don't have any interest in investigating schemas that take care of all people because they would have to sacrifice materially.

Of course, a start domestically would be a movement based upon securing the minimum of needs for all people: shelter, food, job and health insurance. Radically, redefining the role that money plays in our lives. That it is a means and not an ends.

FO: What do you think of the current direction of the Queer movement? Where would you like to see it heading?

AO: First, let me say that I am supremely fascinated by the Queer movement, by our collective radical her/history, and by the sacrifices that have been made by so many of our s/heroes.

I do think that once you become somewhat "accepted" by the mainstream, however, you need to really re-evaluate who is being left out and radically reconfigure the tactics and priorities. Almost always, it's people who really deviate in some way, really challenge the normative in more ways than simply

being "gay", or people whose cultural identities are socially marginalized in other ways. It's easy to get swept up in Rainbow Mastercards and car stickers, and forget that things like healthcare, care of the elderly, feminism, people of color, etc. are all crucial to a justice movement- and are being ignored.

I think any movement as fluid and almost solely identity-based as ours is really hard to organize on a national level. I am supportive of organizations like NGLTF (national gay and lesbian task force) that attempt to operate from a grassroots bottom-up schematic.

FO: Can you speak about your work in prisons and what motivated you pursue such work?

AO: The prison industrial complex represents so much of what is twisted in our culture: the reasons that people are there, the kinds of populations that are represented (the students at the high school where I did a performance have a sign up that says "Welcome to the Just Us System").

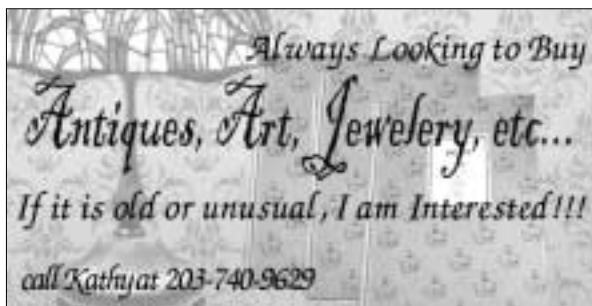
I just feel that white-collar crime is probably the most harmful to the most number of people in this world and yet, corporate officials go about their lives free, armed and dangerous.

Then, of course, the prison labor that goes on, the way that prisons themselves have become a commodity.

Neeve actually was the force behind this project, "Youth Aloud", where "Feed the Fire" supports spoken word artists to teach in the male and female high school jails, as well as in a high school for queer youth in New York City. We're still struggling, financially, to support this project, but we're dedicated to it. We both feel that spoken word is an art form that is particularly critical in helping underserved youth populations. It gives students a platform, validation of their voice and experiences.

For more information on Alix's work and upcoming performances visit www.alixolson.com

Francisca Oyogoa is an activist on issues pertaining to social and economic justice. Her focus is on researching and developing economic models which reflect the ideals of sustainability, participatory economics, mutual aid and egalitarianism. She lives in Meriden, CT.



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