

# afterword to the 2009 edition

*by dean spade*

Ten years ago Eli Clare shared his observations of the Stonewall 25 event in New York City. The event was hailed as a defining moment for queer identities and politics of the 1990s, and to Eli it revealed disturbing trends of consumerism, inaccessibility, and a narrowed agenda in lesbian and gay politics. Eli laid out a vision of what we might work to see unfold by the 50th-anniversary of Stonewall. His vision centered on economic justice, wealth redistribution, universal access to healthcare and education, and a new leadership paradigm for queer and trans rights struggles that would center groups marginalized by multiple vectors of oppression. Today, as *Exile and Pride* is reissued as a South End Press Classics edi-

tion, 40th-anniversary celebrations of the Stonewall uprising are kicking off around the country. Where are we on the path to the vision Eli boldly proclaimed for those 50th-anniversary celebrations that are now only a decade away? What might the pages of *Exile and Pride* hold for us as we strategize about building the kind of queer and trans resistance, and the kind of world, that Eli envisioned?

Today, the divides that Eli discussed 10 years ago are more apparent than ever. A gay rights agenda focused on formal legal equality—specifically access to marriage for same-sex couples, inclusion in military service, and inclusion in anti-discrimination and hate crimes laws—remain the narrow focus of the most visible and well-resourced lesbian and gay (now often going by the name “LGBT”) political formations. Radical queer and trans resistance to the limitations of this agenda continues. Queer and trans activists have thoroughly critiqued the goal of marriage inclusion, arguing that queer people should be fighting to abolish an institution that privileges certain family forms and sexual arrangements and refuses to recognize others. Queer and trans people of color and poor people have consistently articulated the limited value of marriage inclusion for communities who do not have private property or employment benefits to share, and whose families are targeted for dissolution by child welfare systems regardless of marital status. Feminists and communities of color have pointed out the long histories of marriage as a structural tool of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism. Queer immigrants have refuted the logic that same-sex marriage will help queer people immigrate, exposing how limited such a pathway is since it requires a partner who is a US citizen and how much more urgent meaningful interventions into immigration policy that would reach all immigrants are. Radical queer and trans people have charged the disproportionately white, professionally-led, well-resourced lesbian and gay rights organizations with creating an agenda that fails to deliver any meaningful redistribution of life chances to the queer people most vulnerable to the worst homophobic and transphobic violence; instead, they’re trading our

radically-rooted struggle for a restoration of white privilege and class privilege for the small minority of elite gay men and lesbians.

These activists have consistently echoed Eli's vision of Stonewall 50. They have asked, what if instead of fighting for anti-discrimination laws that we know are not enforced and do not reach the most vulnerable workers, we fight for guaranteed income for all and an end to poverty and wealth? What if instead of fighting for on behalf of the shrinking number of people who have jobs with health benefits to be able to share them with spouses, we fight for universal health care? What if instead of fighting for family recognition for lesbian and gay parents through marriage, we fight to end the racist, classist, ableist, homophobic, and transphobic child welfare and family law systems that tear so many families and communities apart? What if instead of fighting to add our identities to hate crimes laws that do not prevent violence against us but do add punishment to those who harm us, we fight to end the criminal punishment system that targets queer and trans people and subjects us to extreme violence? Many of these activists have used Stonewall and the Compton's Cafeteria Riot as emblems of a queer and trans politics that resists police brutality, and that centers the needs and concerns of poor people, people of color, trans people, people with disabilities, immigrants, and criminalized people.

In the wake of Proposition 8, and the new same-sex marriage landscape emerging with states like Iowa and Maine now allowing gay and lesbian marriages, the divisions underlying the divergent strategies of the last decades are increasingly blatant. The *Advocate's* November 2008 cover, which proclaimed "Gay Is the New Black," sent waves of anger across queer and trans communities. White gay and lesbian public figures blamed voters of color in California for Proposition 8's passage, exploiting an analogy between racism and homophobia that erases the existence and political struggles of queer and trans people of color and participates in the racist mythology that white supremacy is a thing of the past in the US. The long-term limitations of single-issue white gay and lesbian politics have never been clearer to see, yet the consolidation of

messaging and the resource differential between political formations supported by wealthy gay and lesbian people and the radical resistance of marginalized queer and trans communities make the existence of anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-ableist politics an unknown in the national debates emerging around “Gay Americans.”

In this context, the contribution of *Exile and Pride* is perhaps more valuable, and more urgently needed, than ever. The most general characterization of what Eli’s analysis offers might be that it demands complexity and an account of the multi-vector and contingent natures of oppressions, identities, and struggles. More specifically, I want to outline a few of the specific critical engagements *Exile and Pride* offers that are especially useful tools for the current moment.

First, Eli provides a vivid critique of progress narratives, both spatially and temporally. He disrupts the binary of rural/urban that assigns to rural backwardness, homophobia, violence, and ignorance while assigning to urban sophistication, liberation, tolerance, and greater safety for outsiders. He troubles the notion that queer and trans people find ourselves and liberate ourselves in the city, leaving behind rural settings that offer us nothing. Instead, he paints the rich and complex dynamics of sexual and gender outsider statuses in rural communities and shares the complex grief and longing for rural ways that he faces as he mixes with urban queer people who dismiss and simplify rural life. Through a careful analysis of the class, gender, and ability dynamics that shaped his own rural context, he exposes the inaccuracy of the societal narrative of urban queer liberation and wholeness, requiring the reader to wrestle with the complexities erased by the commonly oversimplified vision of rural life.

His rejection of historical progress narratives is visible in his discussion of the move from a societal relationship to disability focused in gawking for entertainment to one focused in medical scrutiny and verification. He dares to ask whether this shift, often considered a sign of progress by nondisabled people, is truly

an uncomplicated improvement. Are things really better than they were before? He cites the imprisonment, abuse, and neglect faced by people with disabilities at the hands of medical professionals, and notes the varying degrees of independence that work in freak shows allowed some people with disabilities. His examination of the racist, imperialist, sexist, and ableist context of the freak shows does not allow the reader to rest easy that the decline of freak shows and the expansion of medical authority over the cultural meaning of and the lives of people with disabilities is an improvement. Eli's critiques of progress narratives that are so central to US American liberalism and that allow for a comfortable erasure of the deep, persistent, founding logics of white heteropatriarchy that constitute US nationhood are particularly instructive in this historical moment. As people across the United States declare the 2008 election of President Barack Obama as evidence of the end of racism, and the spread of a limited legal "equality" framework for gay and lesbian people as a sign of US moral superiority that justifies war-making against supposedly "backward, fundamentalist" Muslim people, we must sharpen our critical tools against such narratives. Eli's beautiful and compelling storytelling not only exposes erased histories and terrains, but also models a critical lens for examining narratives of progress that produce and reproduce oppression.

*Exile and Pride* also directs our attention to the complexities of horizontal and internal oppression dynamics, demanding a searching analysis of political work and interpersonal interactions in resistant communities. The book offers this analysis both at the level of personal/political identity and at the level of movement strategy, carefully tracing the interwoven nature of the two. Eli's examination of how dynamics of oppression impact our relationships—to ourselves, to those we share community with, and to the structures and governance of political movement organizations and activities—continues to offer urgently needed insight. Today's organizers find ourselves facing a complicated political terrain marked by the cooptation and professionalization of various social

justice projects. We witness disturbing trends related to non-profitization/ngo-ization where leadership often rests in the hands of people with graduate degrees or philanthropists who make decisions about strategy and direction for organizations while people directly impacted by the oppression these same organizations purport to fight are consigned to the role of “client,” “consumer,” “participant,” or “patient.” Race, gender, class, and ability hierarchies are disturbingly reflected in the pay scales and decision-making structures of many organizations, with white, able-bodied, non-trans men (and less frequently, non-trans women) operating as well-paid executive directors and CEOs while people of color, people with disabilities, trans people, and people without formal education typically occupy low-paid outreach or reception jobs—or can’t get in the door at all. Many have argued that the move from membership organization-centered, mass-based social movement structures to corporate- and philanthropy-funded, non-profit professional organizations has shifted the demands of the work toward liberal reform goals and contained the radical potential of resistance in the US. Eli’s critiques of such dynamics, and his call for progressive solutions provide an inspiring vision for alternative trajectories. His descriptions of ADAPT’s work and of the kinds of relationship-based networks of rural queer resistance he witnessed ring with the strategies that are emerging in radical organizations today to create accountable social movement infrastructure. Eli calls for leadership centered in directly impacted communities, for community events that are accessible to and accountable to those community members with the least resources, and for engagement with direct action—making power and taking power. His vision for self-reflective, intersectional analysis at all stages of community mobilization connects to a line of analysis and practice that continues today in the work of organizations like the Audre Lorde Project, Southerners on New Ground, Critical Resistance, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, FIERCE!, Rights for Imprisoned People with Psychiatric Disabilities, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, and many others. The complexity he demands and puts

forth in his analysis is a reflection of historical and contemporary radical resistance that refuses to abandon the most vulnerable people in trade for various forms of recognition and inclusion, a lesson whose learning is desperately needed by the most visible strains of gay and lesbian politics.

It is rare to find a text that is both beautiful to read and provides such powerful analytical tools, political demands, and even detailed measures for success while refusing to sacrifice the complexities of identity and political action. This book defies categorization, exposes the violence of categories, and builds countless bridges between struggles that have been siloed to their own detriment. If we take Eli's invitation to consider the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Stonewall seriously, and if we ask ourselves what it might take to build our resistance so that in ten years time we might see a broad gender, economic, and racial justice movement that centers the leadership and issues of people with disabilities, queer and trans people, immigrants, and criminalized people, this book must be part of the toolkit we use to build the relationships, structures and visions necessary for that moment to arrive.

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