AFTER HOMOSEXUAL

THE LEGACIES OF GAY LIBERATION

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Too queer to be square?

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Perhaps what is most striking, picking up Dennis Altman's *Homosexuality* forty years after it was written, is its depiction of a gay liberation that rejects liberalism. Altman portrays an emerging gay liberation project that departed from the focus of earlier homophile interventions that sought inclusion into existing structures of American life – employment, traditional family relations – and instead aimed to disrupt and dismantle those structures and build alternative ways of living and being. Certain passages in his text suggest a sense of hope in the new strain of gay resistance he was witnessing – perhaps a belief that liberal gay politics was receding as gay liberation emerged. He writes, 'early groups sought to show that they too were respectable, that homosexuals could live restrained lives in station-wagon suburbia... [and seemed to be] pleading to be given a chance to show others just how square – if not straight – they could be':[1]

> Unlike the old line homophile groups, gay liberation sees part of its role as radicalising homosexuals and winning a place for homosexuals in the movement through the assertion of their radical credentials...gay liberation...is likely to be more acceptable to the straight underground than to the square gayworld.[2]

The emerging gay liberation movement Altman depicts is one deeply intertwined with and inspired by other key resistance formations of the time, including Black Power, women's liberation and resistance to the war in Vietnam. The text struggles to analyse the intersections of these movement formations, the differences between operations of anti-Blackness, capitalism and heteropatriarchy, and the technologies of gendered racialisation that make them intersect. Altman expressly considers the investments that Black liberation, women's liberation and gay liberation might share in opposition to policing; in resistance to sexual repression and objectification; and in the dismantling of structures of militarism, family formation norms and white supremacy. The centrality of these questions to the text is anchored by depictions of protest culture in US urban centres at that time, where active engagement in political education projects, consciousness-raising groups, marches, rallies, non-professional and loosely organised groups and convenings comprised a context of participatory political resistance that many people tapped into actively.

Such a depiction is both inspiring and somewhat heartbreaking to read today, in the wake of thirty years of growing conservatism in US gay politics and marginalisation of transformative trans and queer resistance. Altman's text aims to imagine a solidarity-based revolutionary queer politics that drafts sexual and gender outsiders into a growing resistance to white supremacy, capitalism and heteropatriarchy, arguing that we come to and belong to that resistance through our own experiences of being excessive to and policed by violent norms. Sadly, the most visible American gay politics has become the anti-Black, pro-war, anti-feminist strain that

in 2011 rejoiced in the prospect of gay and lesbian soldiers joining imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and made arguments that gay marriage should be legalised because it will produce more shopping. That disappointing gay and lesbian rights politics has not had the relationship Altman's book might have anticipated with Black liberation, collaborating in dismantling technologies of violence that produce and maintain white supremacy through processes of gendered racialisation, but instead has become aligned with key mechanisms of imprisonment and exile, demanding inclusion into police forces, hate-crime regimes, and wealth-gap-reproducing inheritance and tax schemes. The legible demands of this politics seem to have become 'let us be the police, the executioners, the invading armies, the domesticated families, the flexible workforce'.

The day-to-day operation of that politics is also starkly changed from what Altman depicted, and in ways that begin to account for the shift in visible demands. The ad hoc and voluntary nature of the political involvement Altman depicts has shifted sharply in the last forty years, with the rise of what critics are calling the 'non-profit industrial complex' or NPIC. Social movements have been increasingly contained and neutralised through their professionalisation. As formal organisations have proliferated, funded by the stolen wealth of philanthropists and corporations or, sometimes, through various government monies, leadership has narrowed to a disproportionately white, graduate-school-educated elite. Movement demands have shifted from dismantling harmful systems and institutions to a focus on inclusion within them. Non-profit organisations that operate like businesses, with boards chaired by wealthy donors and lawyers and with top-down decision-making that replicates the exploitative, sexist and racist labour practices of the business world, have come to dominate as the most visible iterations of various resistance movements, including queer and trans politics.

While devastatingly sad, it is not surprising that the agendas produced by these organisations match the biographies of their

leaders rather than the needs of those facing the worst manifestations of homophobia and transphobia. These paid leaders stand to benefit from the legalisation of marriage, for example, because they have health benefits through their jobs that they can share with their partners, immigration status they could share through marriage, and wealth to pass on when they die. The issues and concerns of queer and trans prisoners, poor people, people with disabilities, people of colour and immigrants are unlikely to feature centrally in these priorities, and in fact are easily dismissed as marginal as these organisations portray a purportedly universal 'gay American' whose features correspond to the key myths of white supremacy and settler colonialism that US legal systems continue to reproduce. Perhaps most alarming is the grip this disappointing and dangerous turn in gay politics has had on queer imaginations. Many people seem convinced that it is impossible to fight for more than this, and the ways of imagining life and transformation woven throughout Altman's writing, which seem to have been circulating in meetings, bars, protests, parties and even media in the early 1970s, are incorrectly deemed unimaginable in mass culture today.

We live in anti-revolutionary times, and perhaps we should not be surprised that any political struggle can be a site for further developing and expanding violent arrangements that are cast as fair and neutral. Altman asserted that the task of gay liberation was to 'transform the consciousness of homosexuals, to develop the revolutionary potential...inherent in our condition'.[3] Yet, the most visible gay politics today drafts us as consumers seeking a chance to have a TV-quality wedding. The deep sense of personal political practice and experimentation palpable in the pages of *Homosexual*, and the kind of participatory political spaces where queer activists were trying to hash out the relationships between sexual and gender norms and other forces of violence, are not the gay politics we see today represented by the Human Rights Campaign or the Logo Network.

However, the political trajectories Altman traced, despite their existence in the shadow of corporate-sponsored patriotic gay white pride, have not disappeared. In fact, those ideas and formations have continued to develop. The questions Altman raised in 1971 about racism and sexism in gay and lesbian culture and politics, about the differences and overlaps between operations of anti-Blackness and homophobia, about the relationship between capitalism and rigid racialised gender and family norms have, for the last forty years, deeply engaged troublemakers operating under the signs of women of colour, feminism, queer theory, queer of colour critique, trans studies, reproductive justice, indigenous studies, transformative justice, AIDS activism, anti-colonial queer activism, prison abolition, immigrant justice, sex-worker organising, and more. While gay and lesbian rights politics has been refining organisations that operate on traditional hierarchies funded by those who benefit from them, racial and economic justice–centred queer and trans activists have been building collectively run groups, membership-based organisations, affinity groups, cells, study groups and other formations centred on participation and consensus. While white gay leaders and organisations have been alienating political allies through single-issue politics, critical queer and trans political engagements have built and deepened a solidarity-based politics that understands that ending borders, prisons, war and poverty is central to gender and sexual liberation.

These othered queer and trans politics operate in a realm deemed impossible by a neoliberal logic that declares all alternatives to capitalism exhausted. Yet, as the racial wealth divide widens in the United States, as electoral politics increasingly reveals itself bought and sold by the elite of the elite, as infrastructure for daily living crumbles while infrastructure for surveillance and caging grows, the possibilities of queer and trans political practice rooted in mutual aid, participation, consensus and healing rather than punishment, exile and abandonment become more and more urgent and enticing.

Queer and trans activists are working in unfunded collectives around the country to support individual prisoners facing violence and medical neglect. We are on the frontlines of struggles to meet the needs of criminalised immigrants living under the brutal and rapidly expanding immigration industrial complex. We are forming social spaces and healing spaces that reject forms and norms that have kept out people with disabilities. We are confronting the violence that shapes our daily lives and refusing to imagine that policing and prisons are our only option in our search for safety. We are experimenting with having sex, making friendships, dismantling white supremacy, sharing resources, mentoring young people, sabotaging violent machines, writing down our ideas, stealing and repurposing things, growing food, making art, being accountable to each other, caring for elders, and transforming ourselves and the constituencies we are part of in ways that very much echo the experiments of the US queer activism Altman chronicled forty years ago.

At the same time, we are contending with conditions particular to our times, such as massive racialised and gendered criminalisation, the deployment of "gay rights" to pinkwash US and Israeli colonialism and militarism, new levels of environmental destruction, media consolidation, new forms of surveillance and criminalisation of dissent, 'free trade' regimes that further concentrate wealth and poverty, and growing privatized profit-driven warfare. As we undertake these seemingly impossible endeavours under nightmarish conditions, I'm moved to invoke, as Altman did, the slogan taken up by May 1968 protesters: 'Be realistic. Demand the impossible'. It's what we've always been doing.

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1 Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, London: Allan Lane, 1974, p. 116.

2 Ibid., p. 190.

3 Ibid., p. 121.