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Queer Alchemies: Radical Futurity in the Shell of the Now

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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## Abstract

### QUEER ALCHEMIES: RADICAL FUTURITY IN THE SHELL OF THE NOW

By Elizabeth Rice Canfield, PhD

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

Major Director: Catherine Ingrassia, PhD, Professor, English Department

This work operates at the intersection of academics, art, and activism. Within queer studies there is a tension between assimilation and liberation, sometimes situated as between pragmatism and utopia. This work re-examines Frankfurt school Marxist views of utopia through a queer theoretical lens in order to employ the radical imagination and queer futurity to examine new ways of practicing liberation. Drawing from theorists like Judith Butler, Jose Esteban Munoz, and Gloria Anzaldua, this work uses art (film, writing, zine-making, and sound) as a way to envision and enact a better world situated in the present.

## Introduction

In *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks outlines a divide between academic and activist knowledge production: "...the academy was and remains a site of class privilege...Once the women's studies classroom replaced the consciousness-raising group as the site for transmission of feminist thinking and strategies for social change the movement lost its mass-based potential" (9-10). This divide has continued to keep radical community-based thinking and theorizing segregated from academic knowledge production. Similarly, academic knowledge production is inaccessible to community organizers for many reasons, only one of which is class-based (others include race, gender, sexuality, age, "ability," etc.).

My project begins at this juncture, in the space I occupy, with one foot in the academy and one foot in the streets. My goal with this project is two-fold: to answer two very different yet interrelated questions and to ultimately bring them together. One question is personal and has been my dilemma since entering university studies twenty years ago: how is it possible to weave together, or reconcile, academic knowledge, artistic production, and activism? The second question is deeper, but comes from the same feeling of displacement or marginality: how can those involved in the movement for queer liberation reconceptualize a framework for knowledge production, cultural production, and activism in a way that does not continue to unwittingly produce oppressive structures?

Queer theory attempts to “make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp up heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by them and that (in)form them” (Sullivan vi). Queer theory *does* rather than *is*. Grounded in post-structuralist critiques of Cartesian dualism, the humanist model of subjectivity, and centralized notions of power, queer theory is a process by which dominant structures are unraveled and through which new possibilities emerge. Queer theorists, as Sullivan suggests, operate with the understanding that heterosexuality, in its current form, is a “(historically and culturally specific) truth-effect of systems of power/knowledge.” Thus, continues Sullivan, “its dominant position and current configuration are contestable and open to change” (39). Within queer studies, the means to change is highly debated, because of the tension between assimilation and liberation, and a persistent tension exists between the status quo or whether to imagine another world: a tension between pragmatism and utopia. This tension is manifested in queer critiques of assimilationist mainstream political movements like gay marriage or DADT (Don’t Ask-Don’t Tell) activism.

This project calls into question dominant frameworks for queer liberation (e.g. state-sanctioned marriage, military participation) and proposes cultural production as fundamental to overcoming the constraining neo-liberal, racist, (hetero)sexist logics of the “present,” as the “now” is constructed under late capitalism. This project draws from contemporary queer theory and critical theory that attends to the radical imagination and queer futurity as a way to examine

cultural products that arise from queer and anti-imperialist political movements and that point to a “coming community” (Agamben) or “people-to-come” (Deleuze). From this perspective it examines the assimilation/liberation tension through examining a politics of representation in queer cultural production, and it proposes a radical queer futurity as an alternative to this politics of representation. Radical queer futurity is a continual deconstruction of norming processes, time, and embodiment in order to reconfigure and conceptualize Agamben’s “coming community” Radical queer futurity necessitates utopian thinking, as it is situated in the not-yet-here-and-now in one sense, but is already here in another. My discussion of queer cultural production is not by any means exhaustive; there is no way for it to be. Rather, the project is more illustrative. This project can only scrape the surface of what queer cultural production can be--a glimpse into film, music, poetry, and performance--and point to possibilities for subsequent action and investigation.

The “politics of representation” refers to instances when an artist/writer or critic argues for, or facilitates, the visibility of queer people within cultural production, and this “visibility” is an assimilationist visibility. This concept draws on the work of Michel Foucault’s thinking on discourse and Stuart Hall’s work on representation and race. In the *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, Foucault writes, “Discourses [of power] are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy” (101-02). Foucault’s work on

discourse, knowledge, and power highlights a constructionist view of representation, where representations of certain people or groups are highly contested sites of meaning and knowledge-production. These representations are mutable, depending on the coding/decoding process of the audience, and the embedded power structures within that decoding process.

Stuart Hall's work on representation and race also plays an important part in this conception of the politics of representation at work in cultural production by or concerning LGBTQ people. In his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall builds on Foucault and Gramsci in a discussion of how representation is political throughout his detailed analysis of discourses surrounding race, class, and gender. In the fourth chapter of his book, "The Spectacle of the Other," Hall defines a politics of representation as a continuing and "unfinished" struggle over meaning (277). Hall discusses hegemonic understandings of race through the representational act of stereotyping. Stereotyping itself has embedded hierarchical and binary power relations. Alternatives to stereotyping in Hall's view can be problematic (i.e. reversing stereotypes still upholds the power structure within which the stereotype emerges, putting forward more "positive" images of an oppressed group does not necessarily displace the negative images of an oppressed group) (271-275). However, to locate one's strategy for resisting stereotypes within the "complexities and ambivalences of representation itself" is a way to contest representation "from within" (274). This final "counter-strategy," though not promising any "final victories" takes contested sites of representation (like the



black body) directly rather than avoiding these sites, as a means to make the “stereotypes work against themselves” (274).

This project contends with the first two “counter-strategies” in Hall’s work (stereotype-reversal and flooding a “market” with “positive” images). The politics of representation with these two tactics employ both a quantitative and assimilation-based ethos (in arguing for/presenting more narratives about queer people, or queer characters, or arguing for/presenting a greater diversity of what “queer” means or looks like). This politics of representation operates when critics and reviewers tout the unusually macho image of the gay cowboy in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), or the edgy portrayal of queer black gangster Omar Little in the popular HBO series *The Wire* (2002-2008). While it’s arguably important to broaden the notion of what “queer” might be, or to increase the visibility of queer people in culture, these counter-strategies to stereotyping within the politics of representation use the same epistemological and political constructions of “the people” that oppress and colonize queer people living within simulated democracies that profess *strength in numbers*. To characterize representations as “good gay” vs. “bad gay” when discussing cultural products create a continual assimilationist feedback loop, literally and metaphorically getting culture nowhere.

The “good gay” vs. “bad gay” mode of criticism within the politics of representation constitutes a norming process that erases recognition of singular identities as “human.” In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Judith Butler discusses how or whether someone is recognized depends on socially constructed norms. These

“mythical” norms contribute to the reduction of the multitude to the mass. Butler argues that norms related to the recognition of someone as human leads to a differential between human and less-than-human, and “that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life” (2). The question of a “viable life” emerges, not only in a discussion of AIDS cinema (many times in quite literal terms of who survives), queer punk music, or prison narratives, but also within radical queer futurity, which navigates what it means to have a viable life. A viable life is not one merely biologically sustained, but one that asks what “humans require in order to maintain and reproduce the conditions of their own livability,” (39). Butler asks an important question about what it means to truly live. In her work she carefully addresses a right-wing consideration of “life” in terms of the anti-choice argument in reproductive rights debates. She claims that it might be tempting for some, within a conversation about extending viable life more broadly and with broadening the norms around these categories of recognition, to extend this idea of viability to “mute embryos.” However, in this case, significantly, she’s talking about how “the viability of a woman’s life depends upon an exercise of bodily autonomy and on social conditions that enable that autonomy.” Just as the viability of a non-binary person may depend on transforming the “social norms that govern gender” so that access to social and legal support and protection is a social reality (12).

This norming process is a global deployment of Western hegemonic imperial thought, which privileges the white, male, heterosexual, middle-class christian over a host of articulated “others” (which, in turn, define the norm in their

negation of the norm). Jasbir Puar's work with homonormativity discusses how assimilationist homonormativity contributes to the structural violence of racist heteropatriarchy through rewarding those homosexuals who assimilate with recognition of the "human." This assimilation-as-method-for-obtaining-human-status in the mainstream gay rights movement, where the "right" to enter into a state-sanctioned marriage (which, confers other "rights" like immigration, access to health care, easy consolidation and transfer of wealth, etc.) is a "human" right, and thousands of homosexuals are chomping at the bit to get there. Additionally, the "right" to serve in the U.S. military by repealing DADT also indicates an assimilationist motivation for being recognized as "human" by conveniently ignoring how the U.S. military is implicated in horrific structural racist violence both within its own organization (the "color divide" among rank and stature) and its external imperial project (more than 150,000 Iraqis killed in the Iraq War, with 80% of these deaths reported as civilian, according to [idc.org](http://idc.org)). In December 2010, the U.S. Senate repealed DADT with a majority vote. In an ironic twist on the virtual, President Barack Obama's Facebook status proclaimed: "By ending 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,' no longer will patriotic Americans be asked to live a lie in order to serve the country they love." However, *Queer Alchemies* asserts that the U.S. culture is already living the lie, the lie of a simulated democracy under a continual "state of exception" (Agamben's term for the suspension of the juridical order and expansion of executive power). The only "way out" is through radical queer futurity.

The Human Rights Campaign is a national organization devoted to the assimilationist LGBT “human rights” movement that has the goal of ascribing “humanness” to some while relegating “less-than-human” status to others. A quick glimpse of their website shows their vision: “HRC envisions an America where LGBT people are ensured of their basic equal rights, and can be open, honest and safe at home, at work and in the community.” The home page is awash with messages about the marriage “movement.” This movement to participate in a structure that privileges some erotic and emotional relationships over others, and/or that participates in the American war machine demonstrates how the politics of representation is reciprocal. Within the quantity-based representational politics of a simulated democracy, the “mass” movement for “equality” has at its goal to achieve “human” status, yet this “mass” movement’s success hinges on being represented as “good gays” (white, monogamous, middle class, etc.), thus to be considered “human.” Proving one is human in order to achieve human status is an inescapable paradox.

Escaping the continual feedback loop of norming processes and assimilationist politics of representation, requires a shift in the epistemological framework from traditional linear, progressive, quantity-based, representative modes of thought to a non-linear, “rhizomatic” mode of thought. This epistemological shift re-imagines quantity (simulated neoliberal nation-state based democratic model) as multitude (global anarchistic model) and re-situates the relationship between the potential and the actual in order to call forth a radical queer futurity. *Queer Alchemies* draws on the work of continental

philosophers like Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault, but, perhaps more importantly, brings decolonial voices to the conversation, voices like Gloria Anzaldua's, Jose Esteban Munoz's, and E. Patrick Johnson's.

An assimilationist politics of representation depends upon a conception of power as concentrated and hierarchical in order to function. This quantitative model sees democracy functioning as representative (if enough people lobby for this issue, representation in government and change will happen). This concept of power contributes to the view that the only way to shift political and social realities is through assimilationist strength-in-numbers and stereotype-reversal. It is impossible to shift the political and social realities using an assimilationist politics of representation, as western culture lives within a continual state of exception subject to shock doctrine capitalism, so the representative model always/already fails.

Deleuze and Guattari offer the important alternative model to the concentrated hierarchy, that of the rhizome, which leads to Negri's and Hardt's re-vision of quantity as the multitude. These two concepts (the rhizome and the multitude) are key to radical queer futurity as the rhizome situates power as anarchistic, not bound by nation-state models of representation, and the multitude subverts dominant discourses of "the people" and re-envisions "the people" as "a whole of singularities" (Negri, *Approximations*). This conception is important to radical queer futurity because it allows for a more discursive notion of power, one that does not rely on quantitative representation, and it allows for an escape from the imperial norming process through the evocation of an

assemblage of singularities, rather than a unified, homogeneous mass. This re-situation of power and the subversion of dominant understandings of “the people” allows for a new way to look at potentiality, best discussed by Giorgio Agamben.

In *Potentialities* (2000), Agamben reworks the relationship between the potential and the actual commonly found in dominant Western thought. Agamben makes an important distinction between possibility and potentiality: possibility indicates a linear futuring (it is possible that it will snow tomorrow); potentiality does not conform to linear notions of time (it is always already snowing). What is radical about this thinking about potentiality is that Agamben situates it within its negation, impotentiality. Agamben carefully distinguishes potentiality-as-capacity-for-the-actual from a potentiality as imbued with its negation, impotentiality (to *not* do, or to *not* be). Through the latter form of impotentiality it is possible to grasp the actual. So, not envisioning potentiality as its ability to be actualized (potentiality that is “used up” in order to produce the real), but instead, through impotentiality, people are able to see the real. This concept of seeing has important ramifications for freedom. According to Agamben, impotentiality (the quality that makes us human), enables us to live in “relation to [our own] privation,” (183).

This capacity for realizing humanness and becoming free through privation is also key to freedom from linear time and physical space, as well as liberation from the politics of recognition around norming processes. If the actual as no longer “using up” the potential in order to become real, it is possible to explore how potentiality, through its negation, opens up time and space. This

opening up of time and space is key to a conceptualization of radical queer futurity. For example, Agamben's view of impotentiality has connections to Deleuze's "people who are missing" in that minorities are usually considered to be those who have yet to develop, in the capitalist, neoliberal sense of the term (think "third world" or "developing countries"). Thus, those imbued with impotentiality are those who are missing, who have been erased due to their "lack" of "development." Yet it is precisely the people who are missing who will engage in Deleuze's notion of the collective utterance to participate in Agamben's "coming community." It is precisely the people who are missing, through enforced passivity due to the global imperial project, who actualize their potentiality through its negation, impotentiality, in order to create an alternate viable life.

Deleuze and Agamben open the door for the utopian framework of radical queer futurity. Jose Esteban Munoz, describes utopia as "somewhere between the figure of the freakish and often solitary outsider, the madwoman street preacher, and the politically engaged collectivity" (169). Many queer people, particularly the most vulnerable (poor, non-normative, non-white), give up on the future in order to concentrate on the here-and-now of what Munoz calls "gay pragmatism" (i.e. same-sex marriage and gays in the military). An assimilationist politics of representation is not a viable option for them. Drawing on the philosophy of German idealism and the Frankfurt School, particularly Ernst Bloch, Munoz claims that "we are not yet queer" as queerness is a "horizon imbued with potentiality" (1). Munoz does not see the aesthetic as an escape

from a social reality, but as way to map the future (of course, like for Deleuze and Agamben, the “future” does not exist on a linear temporal plane). The “modes of performance” of artistic products, “ask important questions of aesthetic practice, questions that attempt to visualize what is not yet there”(170). Munoz maintains that utopian thinking has always been queer, in that it exists in the realm of the possible (as queer is not-yet-realized), and that the power of radical queer art forms is that they function as a mode of questioning and visioning for this radical queer futurity. Queer cultural production as a way of both knowledge production and political project of visioning for a community-to-come interrogates the solidity of the foundation of enlightenment rationalist thought, which privileges the material “now” over the imaginative “yet-to-come.”

\* \* \*

Drawing on the theoretical material detailed above, this project both critiques an assimilationist politics of representation with LGBTQ cultural production and also poses an alternative framework for art-making and activism that utilizes contemporary thinking about utopias. This project attempts to bridge the theory/practice divide in two major ways. First, by examining cultural production in a variety of modes, as detailed in the chapter review below, this project will show how queer cultural production is both a result of, and contributes to, a utopian futurity in art-making and community building. Second, this project also bridges the theory/practice divide by outlining and discussing “concrete utopias” (Bloch, Munoz) in activist practice. The goal is to model a framework for



analysis and activism that actively resists an assimilationist model and that points to alternative ways of conceptualizing identity and politics in service to the queer liberation movement.

The chapters move in a way that theorizes “bare life” (Agamben) more broadly from discourses of resistance and illness/plague, under late capitalism to more specific iterations of “bare life” when considering geography and structural violence within a networked surveillance/incarceration system. This framework also allows a discussion of biopolitics and activism to emerge. The final chapter is more “practical” in the sense that it documents a community-based art making practice that functions within this framework, while also taking into account the impact that cultural production has had on the activism that informs this practice.

The first chapter, “Theorizing Revolutionary Activism within a State of Exception: Revisiting Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames*”, looks at Lizzie Borden’s radically still-relevant film *Born in Flames* (1983). This film gives us a glimpse into an intersectional, non-hierarchical feminist response to widespread structural violence against women living under a state of exception, where governmental powers ooze outside the parameters of national and international law, rendering citizen-subjects as “indeterminable” (Butler, Agamben). This chapter explores how Borden’s film inspires a new vision for activism and politics under Empire, using a decolonial queer theoretical perspective to show how radical art opens up utopian possibilities for political organizing, art, and academic work.

Drawing from feminist and queer cultural studies critics like bell hooks and Michael Bronski, and philosophers like Gilles Deleuze, this chapter demonstrates

how film, particularly independent feminist and queer film from the 1980's and 1990's, proposes a glimpse of the yet-to-come that is already here through the internal politics of its aesthetic. In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze makes a salient point about how cinema can be the way to an alternative future: "Art, and especially cinematographic art, must take part in this task: not that of addressing a people, but which is presupposed already there, but of contributing to the invention of a people. The moment the master, or the colonizer proclaims, 'There have never been people here,' the missing people are becoming, they invent themselves, in shanty towns and camps, or in ghettos, in new conditions of struggle to which a necessarily political art must contribute," (217). Borden's film is not just a critique of 1970's and 1980's politics; it is much more than that. *Born in Flames* contributes to this invention of the people.

*Born in Flames* is a perfect film to begin this dissertation, as the content of the film overtly deals with what Giorgio Agamben calls a state of exception. The film begins after a revolution, a "war of liberation," yet the political situation is anything but liberated. In fact, governmental power and surveillance has tightened and the most vulnerable citizens (the poor, the non-white, the queer) have been pushed further into a state of "bare life" (as Agamben theorizes the *homo sacer*). Because the cultural products examined throughout the dissertation were created from the 1980's to the present, beginning the dissertation with an application of Agamben is important to the arc of my argument, as the concepts of "bare life" and U.S. exceptionalism echo throughout the dissertation.

Chapter 2, “The Virtual Witness Function in AIDS Cinema,” investigates how cultural production (and in this case, filmmaking) can be an important site for theorizing radical change. Using queer and poststructural theory, this chapter contrasts the assimilationist politics of representation (that we see in mainstream film about queer people) with a liberatory radical queer futurity that emerges from independent queer film and discusses a way to reframe the witness function in AIDS cinema as a method for theorizing and realizing this radical queer futurity.

This tension between the assimilationist politics of representation and radical futurity appears within a few key films of the 1980’s and 1990’s, *Philadelphia* (1993: Demme), *Fire in My Belly* (1986-87: Wojnarowicz), and *Black Is, Black Ain’t* (1995: Riggs). These cinematic texts navigate the AIDS crisis. *Queer Alchemies* argues how a radical queer futurity *emerges* from the films of Riggs and Wojnarowicz, through the virtual witness function, where Demme’s film cuts off the potentiality for such a move. In addition, because much of the critical discourse on AIDS cinema from the 1980’s and 1990’s is grounded in trauma studies’ notion of the witness, this chapter will show the need to re-imagine the role of the witness as virtual, emerging from AIDS cinema, and as a function rather than as an individual, in order to fully realize a radical queer futurity.

This examination of the witness function, drawing from film critic and trauma studies expert Roger Hallas and innovative theorists in critical performance studies like E. Patrick Johnson, allows a re-envisioning of the role of the spectator in film reception as one with agency and futurity. This chapter

extends the discussion of the relationship between what a cultural product is *about* vs. what a cultural product *can do*, thus bringing spectatorship into an activist model.

Chapter 3, “Homonormativity and the Structural Violence of the Geographic Solution,” looks at how hegemonic myths of metronormativity are internalized and how these myths play out in both the dominant culture and the LGBTQ subcultures. Metronormativity is a term that theorist Scott Herring introduced in his work *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (2010) to describe how dominant mythologies about rural spaces thus reify urban spaces as the norm. These myths, by constructing the rural as backward, violent, and oppressive, thus also construct urban areas as sophisticated, safe, and liberating. These myths contribute to what Lisa Duggan calls homonormativity, which creates LGBTQ subjects as urban, white, male, middle class, consumers. Anyone outside this norm is erased from mainstream LGBTQ media images and politics. This myth-making and norm-reinforcing is not only dangerous (and arguably, violent) to queer/trans folks living in rural areas (or all the complex situations “in-between,” as the label “rural” is complicated), but also non-hegemonic queer/trans folks who inhabit our “gay Meccas.” A truly liberationist politics requires a more nuanced and intersectional view of how geographic location shapes queer identity formation (in all its complexity), notions of “community”, and political participation.

This chapter deals primarily with assimilationist politics of representation concerning geographic location, race, and space. This chapter examines two

films, *Small Town Gay Bar* (2006) and *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) in contrast to print media like E. Patrick Johnson's *Sweet Tea* (2008) and Mary Gray's *Out in the Country* (2009) and independent film about queer rurality that actively resist homonormative ideas about geographic location and identity. In addition, this chapter examines activism-as-performance in a detailed case study of the protest theatre of Southerners on New Ground, an activist group located primarily in rural areas that draws together LGBTQ politics with economic justice, immigration rights, and feminism.

Chapter 4, "Bodies in Space/Politics of Place: Resisting the Prison-Industrial Complex through Community-Based Writing and Art Making Practice," explores how the Prison-Industrial Complex is ever expanding, increasing numbers of people fall into the category of *homo sacer* ("the unnameable and unclassifiable," those who are neither inside nor outside the law, yet subject to the law), as theorist Giorgio Agamben writes. From a feminist/queer perspective influenced by Gloria Anzaldua, bell hooks, and Angela Davis, this chapter interrogates the intersectional politics of bodies in non-consensual spaces like jails and prisons, and what it means for women and people who do not conform to the gender binary inside these spaces. Based on my personal experience teaching a feminism and writing workshop for VCU students and RCJ inmates on the "women's side" of the Richmond City Jail, a municipal facility known for its harsh living conditions and staff misconduct, this chapter theorizes how feminist/queer border epistemologies and critical race

theory apply to prison justice, as well as the role of writing and art making from the margins in the prison abolition movement to envision a world without prisons.

This chapter draws from the chapter that precedes it to discuss the intersections of cultural production and activism more overtly. While the first three chapters discuss cultural production AS activism, the last two look at how the framework of radical futurity could emerge from activism AS cultural production. The conceptual arc of this dissertation fully fleshes out here, with the most compelling example of “bare life”, the prison, at its center. This chapter is also the concluding piece: it achieves the fusion of theorizing, cultural production, and activist practice. This final chapter will pull together any concluding remarks and pose new questions generated by the preceding four chapters.

This project comes out of a long-term personal engagement with activism and art-making, both inside and outside the academy. This dissertation will bridge seeming gaps among artistic/cultural production, academic research and work, and activism, as well as gaps between theorizing and action. My art-making process, also engages in community-based models of visionary art practice. My work with zine-making, art book printing, and sound, as well as my collaborative work in the collective art group, colectivo caliban, probes and theorizes the role of colonialism and structural violence within communities. The academic work of this dissertation aligns with this art-making practice, and attempts to “talk the walk,” to bridge a conceptual and disciplinary divide between theory and cultural production. My work in the Richmond City Jail and my activist work with prisoners attempts to bridge activism, theory and art in a way that

interrogates temporality, biopolitics, “viable life”, and sexualities. This work is the start to an academic career that continues to develop these ideas and demonstrate interdisciplinary within community-based activist practice.

This project is also a way to continue to shape an activist identity. So much of the academic work in Gender and Sexuality Studies is inaccessible to activists, due to its heavy academic jargon and restrictive publishing practice. My work with DIY publishing and performance attempts to make this work more accessible. This dissertation is one way to realign my thinking with the language of the academy in a way that translates into more colloquial iterations. This act of translation doesn't go one way, however. Part of the challenge of this dissertation is to situate activist practice in academic language, to pull the seemingly contradictory parts of my identity together in a way that makes sense to me, and in a way that I can communicate professionally.

### **A note about Utopia:**

Last year, I was part of a panel entitled “Futures of the Queer Archive” at the National Women’s Studies Association conference with two other scholars in queer studies. The reason the three of us were placed together on this panel is that, in our work, we each attend to various conceptualizations of the archive, and the politics embedded in these conceptualizations. What emerged within the discussion part of the session was an argument about the contemporary use of *utopia* in queer theoretical work, mostly prompted by the question of whether to use Foucault’s concept of *heterotopia* as “replacement” for *utopia* in contemporary queer theorizing. It comes as no surprise that Foucault would appear prominently in these discussions, as many times, his work is (often rightly) seen as “foundational” to queer studies as a discipline. However, it is my re-reading of Marx and Engels through certain Frankfurt School philosophers and contemporary decolonial queer theorists that inspire a continued commitment to (a particular kind of) utopian philosophy, in addition to my growing dismay that contemporary liberatory philosophy remains grounded in a Eurocentric framework, that give me pause during these debates.

My reading of Marx and Engels through certain Frankfurt School philosophers concerning conceptualizing utopia shows how decolonial queer theory reframes utopia in radically important, and divergent ways from the Eurocentric model. These theorists point to a rethinking of linear time and “progress” when it comes to social justice movements.



Steven Lukes, in his important essay on Marx and Engel's critique of utopian socialists (like Henri Saint-Simon and Robert Owen) calls their critique "anti-utopian utopianism" (155). The commonly held understanding of Marx and Engel's critique of utopian socialist thought in this vein centers on three main themes: (1) It is tactically impractical to focus on what could be, and more crucial to focus on what is presently pragmatic (Lukes 160). In a letter to Ruge, Marx argues that "the construction of the future and its completion for all times is not our task.... We do not anticipate the world dogmatically, but rather wish to find the new world through criticism of the old" (212); (2) Utopian thinking leads to impractical strategies for social and political change. Marx and Engels felt that a societal change could only be the result of a proletarian revolution and building of a communist society (*Communist Manifesto* 20); (3) Utopian thought focuses on "irrational" or emotional/ethical thought rather than scientific reason. In the preface to *Capital*, Marx famously says that he focuses on "critical analysis of actual facts, instead of writing recipes ... for the cook-shops of the future" (21). However, this commonly held understanding of Marx and Engels' critique of utopian socialism does not account for the nuances in their thinking. It may be more accurate to propose that Marx and Engels were highly critical of static concepts of utopia, and were, perhaps more invested in dynamic concepts of utopia. Lukes states, "Marxism's anti-utopianism [here 'Marxism' refers to what follows Marx and Engels] has weakened and subverted its utopianism, to the considerable detriment of Marxism itself, both in theory and in practice" (155).

Lukes asks an important question of the commonly held notion of Marx and Engels' work that "theory expresses...a knowledge of a self-transforming present, not of an ideal future": "How can one have the one kind of knowledge (of the self-transforming present) without the other (of the shape of future society)?" (158). Lukes claims that the focus on scientific rationalism undercuts the Marx's vision for a future (communist) society. Through a series of interrogations, Lukes attempts to discern why the utopian has been lost in Marx's and Engels' writing, as well as that of some of the Marxists who follow them. Lukes claims that Marx and Engels saw the building of socialism historically guaranteed, the eventual emancipation of humans from wage slavery as obvious (due to the extreme structural violence and alienation of capitalism), and focusing on speculating on the future as counter-revolutionary, as it distracts from the building of socialism (ergo a critique of static utopianism). This comes in direct contrast to much of Marx and Engels' writing about the inevitability of the end of capitalism and the emancipation and equality of humans (157-159).

This dynamic aspect of utopian thought is one of the more inspiring aspects of Marx for Frankfurt School philosopher Ernst Bloch. Though Bloch doesn't share the same limelight as Adorno, Benjamin, and Marcuse in some areas, his work on utopian thought and his critique of the pessimism of his contemporaries is highly instructive to developing a more liberatory view of utopia. His book, *Heritage of Our Times*, critically examines the rise of fascism in Europe, and posits that fascism is the result of static utopian thought and distorted view of hope, which was in sharp contrast to many of his

contemporaries, who took a more nihilistic view of fascism. Bloch was also criticized by his contemporaries for his optimism. *The Principle of Hope*, his most oft-cited work, where he discusses an "Ontology of Not-Yet Being" in which we are continually building a concrete utopia, forging a new world in the shell of the old, creating this new world out of a yearning for this new world, driven by this yearning, and our dreams/hopes for overcoming this yearning. Utopia, for Bloch, is not a pre-existing ideal state, but rather a *process*:

...the Not-Yet-Conscious in man belongs completely to the Not-Yet-Become, Not-Yet-Brought-Out, Manifested-Out in the world. Not-Yet-Conscious interacts and reciprocates with Not-Yet-Become, more specifically with what is approaching in history and in the world. And the examination of anticipatory consciousness must fundamentally serve to make comprehensible the actual reflections which now follow, in fact depictions of the wished-for, the anticipated better life, in psychological and material terms. From the anticipatory, therefore, knowledge is to be gained on the basis of an ontology of the Not-Yet." ("Introduction" par 11)

For Bloch, utopia is not deferred to a far-off point in a linear future, and history is not merely a collection of events leading to the present, but that, for Bloch, utopia has a present-tense immediacy and tangibility. We are not merely products of our history, we are dynamic, changing, transforming/transformed beings. Equally compelling is Bloch's concept of "real possibility" (anchored in the present, yet unconditioned) rather than a theoretical possibility (no

relationship to history, merely fantasy) and how “real possibility” disrupts linear time in that it makes the case that utopia is always-already here (Bloch *Utopian* 4-6). Through Bloch one can re-interpret Marx and Engels through a more dynamic lens.

Jose Esteban Munoz is the most relevant decolonial theorist who brings Bloch’s philosophy into context with queer theory. Munoz’s *Cruising Utopia* has been one of the most influential books on my thinking about how to reconcile critical theory and queer theory, and is central to my dissertation work on this subject. Munoz takes Bloch’s *Principle of Hope*, and applies it to an argument about cultural production, time, and what he calls “gay pragmatism.” For Munoz, Bloch’s idea of “concrete utopia” (rather than abstract utopia) is what is so compelling: “Concrete utopias are related to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential. In our everyday life, abstract utopias are akin to banal optimism. Concrete utopias can also be dreamlike, but they are the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many” (Munoz 3). Munoz critiques the homonormative impulse with an optimism situated in capitalist assimilation (i.e. the wedding-industrial-complex), and focuses on Bloch’s notion of futurity-within-the-now (the “real possibility”) as a means to reconceptualize queer cultural production and politics (which, for both Munoz and Bloch, are not separate entities). Munoz writes, “A Blochian approach to aesthetic theory is invested in describing the anticipatory illumination of art, which can be characterized as the process of identifying certain properties that can be detected in representational practices

helping us to see the not-yet conscious” (3). Munoz’s critique of homonormativity is evidenced in his discussion of the “marriage movement,” where he notes that “the aping of traditional straight relationality, especially marriage, for gays and lesbians announces itself as a pragmatic strategy when it is in fact a deeply ideological project that is hardly practical” (21). Munoz’s critique of homonormativity as structurally racist/colonial throughout his work also is an important update to Bloch’s ideas, as Munoz centers Bloch’s contribution to aesthetic theory and cultural production on discussions of the relationships between capitalism, colonialism, and homonormativity.

Munoz is inspired by Bloch’s notion that art has a utopian function, which is demonstrated through a certain surplus of the work that “promises a futurity, something that is not quite here” (Munoz 7). Munoz’s work pulls from historical events and cultural products to inform the present, but only in the way that queerness is on the horizon. Munoz claims that “we are not yet queer,” as queerness is a “horizon imbued with potentiality” (1). The “modes of performance” of artistic products, “ask important questions of aesthetic practice, questions that attempt to visualize what is not yet there”(170). Munoz maintains that utopian thinking has always been queer, in that it exists in the realm of the possible (as queer is not-yet-realized), and that the power of radical queer art forms is that they function as a mode of questioning and visioning. Art, as both knowledge production and political project of visioning for a community-to-come, interrogates the solidity of the foundation of enlightenment rationalist thought, which privileges the material “now” over the imaginative “yet-to-come.” Munoz

writes, “Gay pragmatic organizing is in direct opposition to the idealist thought that I associate as endemic to a forward-dawning queerness that calls on a no-longer-conscious in the service of imagining a futurity” (21).

Glancing back at historical moments, places, and spaces may offer an “anticipatory illumination of queerness,” yet Munoz also warns against ignoring the present, as the utopian impulse is “extra to the everyday transaction of heteronormative capitalism” (22). Drawing from Heidegger’s ecstatic unity of temporality, Munoz also offers a way to see temporality as dynamic and horizontal, and as a way to a “greater openness to the world” (25).

In her highly celebrated book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldua creates a non-linear “autohistoria” of the borderlands, a conceptual, historical, geographical, psychological, and spiritual “third space.” In this work, Anzaldua blends history, autobiography, poetry, myth, and politics to “shift out of habitual formations: from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (101). In terms of the role of the aesthetic, Anzaldua also employs a non-linear approach to past/present/futurity (Munoz’s “horizontal temporality”). She writes:

My “stories” are acts encapsulated in time, “enacted” every time they are spoken or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as “dead” objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art

works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a “who” or “what” and contains the presence of persons...When invoked in rite, the object/event is “present; that is, enacted,” it is both a physical thing and the power that infuses it (89).

Similarly, one can see how hybridity in this work also indicates a non-linear view of time. Anzaldua describes hybridity through her invocation of the *mestiza*: “In a constant state of mental nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, *la mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition” (100). Working with these two dominant metaphors, the borderlands and the *mestiza*, conceptualizations of land and body intersect with art, identity, and politics. At the end of her chapter on “*mestiza* consciousness,” Anzaldua ends with a poem fragment:

This land was Mexican once  
was Indian always  
and is.  
And will be again (113).

While in linear time, one moment is seen to replace the one that precedes it, Anzaldua presents a framework where all is happening at once, where the past is embedded in the present, and the future is already here. This framework allows oppressed people, *las mestizas*, the queer *raza*, to function not only in the capitalist notion of the now, the singular, the “alien,” the dispossessed, but to simultaneously occupy multiple temporalities and spiritual planes at the same

time, as one sees with ritual. Similarly to Munoz, by divesting in Western imperial rationalist epistemologies of linearity and clean categories, Anzaldua calls forth a present futurity imbued with potentiality for liberation.

Walter Mignolo, famous for his work on decolonial thinking, discusses two key concepts in his writing that pull Anzaldua and Munoz together in a decolonial utopian framework. The first is pluriversality. This concept is most clearly outlined in his analysis of the Zapatista movement in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*. Pluriversality is the recognition that there are many divergent and intersecting conceptions of a moment, and directly challenges the Western notion of universality (one standard):

If a pluriverse is not a world of independent units (cultural relativism) but a world entangled through and by the colonial matrix of power, then, it a way of thinking and understanding that dwells in the entanglement, in the borders, is needed. So the point is not to 'study' the borders, very fashionable today, while at the same time "dwelling" in a territorial epistemology, would imply that you accept a pluriverse some place out there that you "observe" from some place else outside the pluriverse. To do so it is necessary to maintain the territoriality of the disciplines grounded on the imperial epistemology of modernity. Thinking pluritopically means, instead, to dwell in the border. Dwelling in the border is not border-crossing, even less looking and studying the borders from the territorial gaze of the disciplines.

(Mignolo, "On Pluriversality")



The second concept is delinking, which is a process by which one thinks pluritopically. In his essay, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of De-coloniality,” Mignolo discusses delinking as a process by which the content of the conversation shifts from Western universality and privileges subaltern reason, one that doesn’t assume the “truth” as grounded in Western epistemologies. These two concepts are important to what Munoz and Anzaldua are doing with time, space, and place in their discussions of cultural production and politics. To delink from the “gay pragmatism” of the “now” in terms of the gay marriage argument is to imagine and inhabit a pluriverse of temporalities and possibilities that are not based on a system of rationalist linearity (“if we keep lobbying and donating to HRC, we can all be free via marriage”). Maria Lugones once said to a group of attendees at her conference talk (myself included) that “if you ask a colonial question, you will get a colonial answer.” Both Munoz and Anzaldua reconceptualize utopia in a way that directly challenges colonial epistemologies.

My pause during the NWSA discussion of the politics of the queer archive arose from a discomfort that, within an academic context, there still remains a dependence upon Eurocentric and Western theorists when theorizing activism in queer communities. Walter Mignolo writes, “It is no longer possible, or at least it is not unproblematic, to ‘think’ from the canon of Western philosophy, even when part of the canon is critical of modernity” (65). To consistently reproduce the historical-linear-narrative arc from Ancient Greece to the North Atlantic in

philosophy/theory in the name of liberation, blindly reifies the modern/colonial project that it attempts to diffuse. What is particularly interesting about Munoz is how he uses Bloch as a starting point, remixing Bloch with critical race theories, subaltern ways of knowing and liberatory performative studies. Rather than supplanting More's *Utopia* for Foucault's heterotopia, philosophers/theorists like Munoz, Anzaldua, and Mignolo point us to new horizons of knowing/being/seeing that are incredibly exciting for queer theory and activism.

## **Chapter 1: Theorizing Revolutionary Activism within a State of Exception: Revisiting Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames***

"...a protected democracy is not a democracy at all..." Giorgio Agamben (*State of Exception*, 15)

### **A Continual State of Exception**

In his October 2011 article, "After September 11: Our State of Exception," Mark Danner proclaims that "We are living in the State of Exception. We don't know when it will end, as we don't know when the War on Terror will end. But we all know when it began" (1). Danner goes on to examine how the "9/11" attacks created a "brightly lit portal through which we were all compelled to step, together, into a different world" (2). Danner argues that this event (9/11) has historically catapulted us into temporary states of siege/exception, yet there is something different about post-9/11 America; the current SoE has no end (2). Agamben's *State of Exception*, however, traces a clear historical line from "emergency" to "emergency" in the West, posing the probable notion that throughout the creation of American government, alongside the establishment of legal civil wars in Western Europe (with the Third Reich as its most dramatic totalitarian example), the SoE has become the rule, not the anomaly (Agamben, *SoE*, 6).

Under the State of Exception, a government can seemingly act “outside” the law/judicial order (extraordinary rendition, use of torture, etc.). Yet, for Agamben, the SoE is neither outside, nor is it inside, the juridical order. The State of Exception lies on the threshold between the two, a concept important to Agamben. Agamben writes, “The suspension of the norm does not mean its abolition, and the zone of anomie that it establishes is not (or at least claims not to be) unrelated to the juridical order” (23). So, the SoE is both legal and extralegal at the same time, which is what allows it its power, as it functions most potently in this “zone of indifference” or threshold where inside/outside blur (23). Danner writes, “Before the War on Terror, official torture was illegal and anathema; today it is policy choice” (3). This notion of “policy choice,” where torture is neither illegal nor legal, is an example of this zone of indifference that Agamben attempts to articulate.

The fact that the State of Exception is ongoing and both ambiguous and ever-present at the same time has grave implications for the people. The State of Exception creates people who are neither inside nor outside the law, the *homines sacrii*, those who are “legally unnamable and unclassifiable” (Agamben, 3). People become detainees, stripped of their rights under the law, exiled from any nation-state protection (if such protection even exists). Who are the *homines sacrii*? Agamben writes about the detainees at Guantanamo Bay, who are “the object of a pure de facto rule, of a detention that is indefinite not only in the temporal sense but in its very nature as well” (4). Judith Butler writes, “To be detained indefinitely, for instance, is precisely to have no definitive prospect for a

reentry into the political fabric of life, even if one's situation is highly, if not fatally, politicized" (*Precarious Life*, 68). These zones of indeterminacy are not always topographically specific, as, following Agamben, the *homo sacer* no longer physically exists on the outskirts of the polis, but, following Hardt and Negri, exists within, and is a part of, Empire. The *homines sacrii* are those who are neither inside nor outside the law (they disrupt the citizen/outlaw binary), subject to structural and interpersonal violence.

In addition to the "War on Terror" creating a population of *homines sacrii*, the United States' domestic policy has continued to create a population of detainees within its own borders. Like Danner's assertion that throughout history there have been isolated events where a state of siege/emergency has been called that has now become the norm (following Agamben), the United States has a history of eruptions of xenophobic "immigration" policies that have had a grave impact on those living within its borders. In 2011, 400,000 people were deported and the projected numbers for 2012 and onward are higher. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (a department under Homeland Security, a unit developed after 9/11) oversees the detainment and deportation of "undocumented" people in the U.S. "Undocumented detainees" awaiting deportation are not charged with a crime. Rather they are placed in "administrative detention." Administrative detention means that they are not afforded the same rights as American citizens who have been charged with a crime, like Miranda rights. The National Immigrant Justice Center's "Isolated in Detention" report shows that 80% of detainees are in a detention situation where

there is a ratio of 100:1 detainees to non-profit supplied lawyers. As politicians posture to see who is more “tough” on immigration, the numbers of detainees in “immigration detention centers” run by ICE will continue to grow.

The creation of a population of *homines sacrii* that is exploding in numbers as the State of Exception continues to ooze into every aspect of foreign and domestic policy, is not only apparent in detention centers. Increasingly oppressive economic policies and the collapsing late capitalist market in the U.S. also contributes to the growth of a population of citizens who are homeless. Homelessness is an indeterminable state, as all citizenship “rights” are tied to having an address. The New York City Department of Homeless Services estimates that over 40,000 New Yorkers access homeless shelters each day. Activists find this number misleading and claim that it is much higher, as the DHS is only able to count those who access shelters, not the thousands who never step foot into a shelter, or who are barred from shelters. Homeless people are subject to violence-without-penalty as are Agamben’s *homines sacrii*. Though Danner is astute in his critique of the Bush-era policy and war-making as the continual State of Exception, it is instructive to see how the SoE is historically present in all existing institutions. To understand how these institutions intersect as they perpetuate the SoE is important when theorizing the utopian potential of radical queer cinema.

### **Shock Doctrines and Economic States of Exception**

A discussion of structural violence and the impact it has on queer/trans\* bodies, and how radical queer cinema attempts to articulate other possibilities is irresponsible without a critique of capitalist economics. Naomi Klein describes disaster capitalism as “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities” (6). She offers a number of examples of how Chicago School free-market fundamentalism drives the managing of disasters like the selling off of the public school system in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and the privatization of war in Iraq after “Shock and Awe.” Like Danner, Klein discusses 9/11 as a major event that reveals disaster capitalism at its finest. The strategy entails: “waiting for a major crisis [like 9-11], then selling off pieces of the state to private players while citizens are still reeling from the shock, then quickly making the ‘reforms’ permanent” (7). Klein’s point is that the “major crisis” can actually be created, like Shock and Awe in Iraq, or like the U.S.-funded genocidal dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile. This “shock doctrine” is an “attraction to a kind of freedom and possibility available only in times of cataclysmic change--when people, with their stubborn habits and insistent demands, are blasted out of the way--moments when democracy seems a practical impossibility. Believers in the shock doctrine are convinced that only a great rupture--a flood, a war, a terrorist attack--can generate the kind of vast, clean canvases they crave” (25). These “moments when democracy seems a practical impossibility” are precisely the “states of emergency” that Agamben theorizes.

Giorgio Agamben shows how the shock doctrine works within/outside the law through his discussion of the state of exception. Not only does the state of exception apply to the juridical order (in fact, it is the suspension of the juridical order) in times of war but this expansion of executive power is invoked for economic “crises” as well. Pairing Agamben with Naomi Klein deepens this understanding of the state of exception, as she shows how the sovereign invokes the state of exception in a crisis in order to further the free-market enterprise (as we saw with the banking “crisis” in the U.S. in 2007-2008).

The Chicago School, led by Milton Friedman, gained much power and notoriety in the 1980’s where their particular brand of deregulated imperial “free” market capitalism was rebranded as “Reganomics.” The world has been altered dramatically due to this breakdown of regulation, this fabrication of economic shocks to further this deregulation, and the horrific structural violence that is necessary to produce such a shock is responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of refugees, environmental devastation, detainment-without-end, the expansion of the prison-industrial complex, and thus, the erasure of a viable life for the multitude. Reganomics, with its devastating effects both in the U.S. and abroad, has heavily facilitated the erasure of certain people. From mass graves in Central and South America to “immigrant detention centers” across the U.S., the reduction of the multiplicity to the mass and the global lie of the politics of representation have created the “clean canvas” for unfettered free-market intervention in public life by producing a global mass of missing people.



The continual “shocks” to our nation-states allow for the easy evocation of the state of exception and therefore the easy “selling off” of the collective state to private corporations (as we will see below with prisons and detention centers). This erosion of the legal and economic commons, and the literal erasure of the people show how, under capitalism, framing “crisis” as shock that must be remedied by strengthening executive power that, in turn, opens markets for private interests, creates a multitude of missing people, Agamben’s *homines sacrii*.

Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin shows how the law is already imbued with violence in his essay “Critique of Violence.” He shows how “policy” and “law” and the enforcement of “policy” and “law” are always already violent. In discussing the legality of violence (sanctioned/unsanctioned violence), Benjamin asks the important question: “What light is thrown on the nature of violence by the fact that such a criterion or distinction can be applied to it at all?” (238). Law-making violence is foundational (it is the performative violence of a declaration of independence or a revolution). Law-making violence finds legitimacy in the future. This violence is created under the guise of liberation. With this type of law-making violence, the “future” is what we see when “policy” like the Patriot Act or “immigration” law is passed. These laws are created to “protect” citizens. The future is invoked as justification for the passing of such laws (U.S. citizens will be “safer” under the Patriot Act, immigration law, or “tougher” legislation related to the “War on Drugs”).

Law-preserving violence, according to Benjamin, is carried out by the already created state. It is conservative and protective. Not only is law-preserving violence used to suppress uprising, but it is enmeshed in the legal system and is fortified every time a judge's gavel strikes. Law-preserving violence is both abstract and direct. The abstraction is within the law, where this violence is implied rather than enacted. However, the use of violence to uphold the law/policy is direct in its impact on the *homines sacrii*. Under a State of Exception, law is made at the point of utterance, and thus the sovereign, with his power to make "executive decisions," both creates and upholds violence in every speech act.

Crucial to the masses accepting this ubiquitous violence is what M. Jacqui Alexander terms "enemy production," a foundation to nation-state edification and the construction of Empire, as well as a process that continually upholds and edifies Empire. This "enemy production" happens both within and outside the imagined/constructed borders of the nation-state. Alexander writes,

Nation building can be...accurately understood as a form of hypernationalism with constituent parts: the manufacture of an outside enemy to rationalize intervention and secure the annexation of lands; the production of an internal enemy to rationalize criminalization and incarceration; the internal production of a new citizen patriot; the creation and maintenance of a permanent war economy, whose internal elements devolve on the militarization of the police and the resultant criminalization

of immigrants, people of color, and working class communities through the massive expansion of a punishment economy whose center is the prison-industrial complex (234).

The “enemy” who is produced is the homo sacer. This enemy is the detainee, the prisoner, the terrorist, the brown, the poor, the queer. Nothing is more effective in maintaining (structurally violent) shock doctrines under the SoE than the creation and sustaining of enemies.

### **Punishment Economies and the Prison Industrial Complex**

When an enemy exists (the criminal, the terrorist, the “illegal immigrant”), there needs to be a place to put him, and a way to put him there. The Prison-Industrial Complex (PIC) is a term coined by social historian Mike Davis and popularized by activist/theorist Angela Davis to describe the growing mass-incarceration of American citizens and the economies that intersect with and are built around, this mass-incarceration. Michelle Alexander writes that “Although crime rates in the United States have not been markedly higher than those of other Western countries, the rate of incarceration has soared in the United States while it has remained stable or declined in other countries. Between 1960 and 1990, for example, official crime rates in Finland, Germany, and the United States were close to identical. Yet the U.S. incarceration rate has quadrupled, the Finnish rate fell by 60 percent, and the German rate was stable in that period,” (7, stats from Michael Tonry’s *Thinking about Crime*, 2004). In the last 30 years, the prison population in the United States has grown from 300,000 to

more than 2 million people. According to Michelle Alexander, no other country incarcerates its racial minorities at the rate that the United States does, with the U.S. incarcerating a larger number of its black population than South Africa under apartheid (Alexander, 6 and Prison Policy Initiative, [http://www.prisonpolicy.org/prisonindex/us\\_southafrica.html](http://www.prisonpolicy.org/prisonindex/us_southafrica.html)).

In the early 1970's, the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals' Task Force concluded in their *Task Force Report on Corrections* that "the prison, the reformatory and the jail have achieved only a shocking record of failure," (Alexander 358). Jael Silliman writes that "At present the INS has more armed agents with arrest power than any other federal law enforcement agency. Mandatory detention provisions have made immigrants the fastest growing incarcerated population in the United States," (xx). As the PIC expands, it is impossible to deny that mass-incarceration is a "growth industry" under the shock doctrine and the SoE. Aramark, Canteen Services, Prison Health Services, TransCor and other corporations that supply prisons took in almost 3B in 2010. IBM, Boeing, Motorola, Microsoft, AT&T, Wireless, Texas Instrument, Dell, Compaq, Honeywell, Hewlett-Packard, Nortel, Lucent Technologies, 3Com, Intel, Northern Telecom, TWA, Nordstrom, Revlon, Macy's, Pierre Cardin, Victoria's Secret, and Target all contract inexpensive prison labor (Bowie, "Profit-Driven Prison-Industrial Complex").

The PIC is not only used for economic gain and structurally racist violence against people of color in the U.S., but it is also a convenient deployment of enemy-creation in a different sense: mass-incarceration and our tacit

acceptance of mass-incarceration allows the powerful to silence dissident voices through deployment of the PIC. Angela Davis, Mumia Abu Jamal, Leonard Peltier, and Assata Shakur are only a few examples of how politically radical people have found themselves targeted by the government and subject to incarceration. COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program) was a program run by the FBI from 1956-1971 that surveilled, infiltrated, and attempted to disrupt political organizations within the U.S. Activists and scholars have held COINTELPRO responsible for the incarceration and murders of prominent activists within the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, and other radical leftist organizations during that period. From “illegal” programs such as COINTELPRO to “legalized” racial profiling, detention, and mandatory minimum sentences, the PIC is not merely the enforcement arm of the SoE, but the connective tissue that underlies and ties together structurally violent systems of oppression.

The PIC is instrumental in the creation of *homines sacrii* in that once branded a “felon,” one loses many of her rights associated with citizenship. For example, “forty-eight states and the District of Columbia prohibit inmates from voting while incarcerated...and the vast majority of states continue to withhold the right to vote when prisoners are released on parole” (Alexander 153). Even after parole, a few states deny ex-prisoners the right to vote for a period of time ranging from a few years to life. The Sentencing Project’s report, “Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States” states that “Each state has developed its own process of restoring voting rights to ex-offenders but most of

these restoration processes are so cumbersome that few ex-offenders are able to take advantage of them...An estimated 5.3 million Americans, or one in forty-one adults, have currently or permanently lost their voting rights as a result of a felony conviction," (1).

Furthermore, a "criminal" history is legal grounds for denying employment in most states. Michelle Alexander writes, "Nearly every state allows private employers to discriminate on the basis of past criminal convictions. In fact, employers in most states can deny jobs to people who were arrested but never convicted of any crime. Only ten states prohibit all employers and licensing agencies from considering arrests..."(146). In addition, there are federal bans on dispensing welfare and public aid to ex-offenders, creating a stratified economic situation that leaves many ex-offenders homeless and/or destitute, (152-154). The PIC expanding to include "illegal" immigrants creates a more dire situation described above, where people imprisoned in immigration detention centers do not even have the basic rights that U.S. "citizens" have.

### **We are Always Already Born in Flames**

Why, thirty years after its release, is Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983) still relevant? First, the film explores the State of Exception through the action of the plot. Despite politicians' claim of instituting law for the sake of a socialist democracy, the film makes the viewer painfully aware of the way governments and economic powers utilize speech acts to expand

exceptionalism. The language of exceptionalism is peppered throughout the film through the use of newscasts that illuminate the hypocritical rhetoric of politicians where “democracy” and “equality” are invoked in order to justify increased police intervention and regulation of citizenship (thus turning the film’s most vulnerable into *homines sacrii*). This exploration of exceptionalism and the “state of emergency” (police are called to suppress a labor riot in one scene, and vulnerable populations are as over-policed as they were before the “socialist war of liberation”) is one way Borden critiques the absorption of the rhetoric of the radical left during the 1960’s and 1970’s into repressive government policy.

The situation of dystopia post-revolution and the use of vigilante justice calls into question ways to theorize justice, violence, and revolution that feature prominently in Benjamin’s work. Throughout the film, the members of the Women’s Army passionately debate the use of violence and the way that revolutionary violence sustains structural violence, even if it is foundational in nature. Though vigilante justice is seen throughout the film, most famously in a scene near the beginning of the film where a gang of women on ten-speed bicycles blowing whistles interrupt a street assault and care for the victim, the Women’s Army members never commit an act of physical violence on another person. Though we see the women arm themselves and consider the possibility of using violence, the film never shows this, leaving Benjamin’s question open to interpretation.

The film also explores the use of the PIC and a program like COINTELPRO to suppress the Women's Army. Adelaide Norris, a young, African-American lesbian activist, travels to northern Africa to learn about women's revolutions there. Upon her return, she is picked up by FBI agents and incarcerated. She mysteriously dies in jail of an apparent suicide, which sparks the women's revolution to question their tactics of non-violence as method. In this critical moment in the film, Borden shines a light on how governments (and the corporations tied to them) work in the indeterminable zone between inside/outside the law in order to achieve the goal of maintaining Empire.

The film is set in New York City, ten years after a successful "war of liberation" in which a social democracy is established. Despite the rhetoric of the new government's political propaganda (egalitarianism, pro-labor, etc.), kyriarchal domination remains. (Kyriarchy is a term coined by Schussler Fiorenza, which illustrates how systems of domination—i.e. racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, etc.—are intersectional, networked, and nodal. The term and the theory behind it imply that people embody/inhabit several subject positions, and positions with privilege become the nodal points through which other positions are experienced, (Fiorenza, "But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation")). Those who remain the *homines sacrii* are those who were so under the former regime: the poor, the queer, the non-white, the female, the punk, the trans\*, etc.

There is a suspicious death in a prison of a member of the Women's Army, an underground activist group that until that point had been known for



consciousness raising, community child care, and workplace activism. This event causes a very diverse group of women to come together in solidarity and revolt, starting with vigilante street justice, and ultimately ending in their destroying a network television tower on the World Trade Center.

After Norris' death, the Women's Army pulls together an assault on corporate media by taking over television stations and broadcasting their own message about Norris' death, and by taking their pirate radio stations rogue by making them mobile and unable to be infiltrated or destroyed. At the end of the film, in a scene that is chilling in the post-9/11 era, the women destroy a communications tower atop the World Trade Center, a symbol of oppressive capitalism and Empire as projected through the media. The confluence of government, media, corporate power, as functions of Empire (and also constituents of Empire) is highly relevant today, with only a few corporations dominating the majority of mass media.

Another important aspect of Borden's film is how the women organize, in a non-hierarchical manner. In one scene, two FBI agents ponder the non-linear way the group is organized as they attempt to "map" the group's members. The agents describe the Women's Army as consisting of a number of cells with rotating leadership, making the group difficult to infiltrate and intimidate. Not only does this moment offer a possible organizing alternative to the radical groups of the 1960's and 1970's who fell victim to COINTELPRO's tactics, but it also hints at the way the multitude might be organized. Hardt and Negri write:

The creative forces of the multitude that sustain Empire are also capable of autonomously constructing a counter-Empire, an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges. The struggles to contest and subvert Empire, as well as those to construct a real alternative, will thus take place on the imperial terrain itself—indeed, such new struggles have already begun to emerge. Through these struggles and many more like them, the multitude will have to invent new democratic forms and a new constituent power that will one day take us through and beyond Empire (15).

While the Women's Army is necessarily part of Empire, it takes part in a global, non-linear, non-hierarchical network of activists working to move us beyond Empire. This organizing structure is rhizomatic and anarchistic, global and local. This method of organizing gives viewers a glimpse into the ways that Agamben's impotentiality can work. The editing of the film itself poses new ways of seeing, of time, and of perspective that hint at how a new world is built in the shell of the old. The shifting points of view between Adelaide (a Women's Army leader), Isabel (a punk rapper), and Honey (a DJ for the pirate Phoenix radio station) allow for a multivocal conversation to emerge that thwarts linear narrative, perspective, or gaze. Additionally, the use of pseudodocumentary and collage presents a disjointed narrative through the use of montage and rough cuts. This technique highlights the privation and impotentiality of the characters that Agamben theorizes, while also offering new ways to see political movements outside traditional systems, while also highlighting the intersectionality of struggle

for a more just world (we see the labor struggle intersect with feminism, intersect with anti-racism, intersect with queer liberation, intersect with the struggle to end global capitalism).

In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze makes a salient point about how cinema can be the way to an alternative future: “Art, and especially cinematographic art, must take part in this task: not that of addressing a people, but which is presupposed already there, but of contributing to the invention of a people. The moment the master, or the colonizer proclaims, ‘There have never been people here,’ the missing people are becoming, they invent themselves, in shanty towns and camps, or in ghettos, in new conditions of struggle to which a necessarily political art must contribute” (217). Borden’s film is not just a critique of 1970’s and 1980’s politics; it is much more than that. *Born in Flames* contributes to this invention of the people with its anarchistic structure and the way the film foregrounds the experience of the oppressed.

Not only does this film open up the new world in the shell of the old (the yet-to-come that was always-already-here) or the potentiality of struggle, but it also opens up other ways to view representation and power. Important to this film is that it is set in the future and it follows a socialist revolution (it doesn’t lead up to one). The revolution has happened and yet the same interlocking systems of oppression remain. Significantly, this film is “at a moment of deepening crisis, when progressive movements are confronted by a cacophony of claims that we have reached the end of history, of ideology, of utopia,” this film juxtaposes “the shortcomings of the traditional left politics with the ongoing dream of a better

future. Rather than with despair, this film is charged with hope” (Fitting, 11). This film offers more than a hopeful look at the end of capitalist patriarchy (or kyriarchy), it opens up the potentiality of the “missing people” (*homines sacri*) in ways that move beyond situating a “new hope” in second-wave feminist politics, or a larger politics of representation.

## **Chapter 2: The Virtual Witness Function in AIDS Cinema**

The concept of a “new hope” can be situated within radical futurity rather than a politics of representation, and this concept is explored in this chapter through examining AIDS cinema of the 1980’s and 1990’s, at the height of the U.S. AIDS crisis (or, more accurately, when the AIDS crisis in the U.S. was mainstream news). The tension between the politics of representation and radical futurity through a few key films of the 80’s and 90’s, *Philadelphia* (1993: Demme), *Fire in My Belly* (1986-87: Wojnarowicz), and *Black Is, Black Ain’t* (1995: Riggs) that navigate the AIDS crisis. The films of Riggs and Wojnarowicz, through the virtual witness function, *reveal* a radical futurity, where Demme’s film cuts off the potentiality for such a move. In addition, the critical discourse on AIDS cinema from the 1980’s and 1990’s, grounded in trauma studies’ notion of the witness, requires a reimagining of the role of the witness as virtual emerging from AIDS cinema and as a function rather than as an individual in order to fully realize a radical futurity.

Dominant readings of *Philadelphia*, *Fire in My Belly*, and *Black Is, Black Ain't* argue for a politics of representation through the seemingly reciprocal relationship between filmed subject and watching audience, where the filmed subject suffers, and the audience witnesses this suffering. Framing AIDS cinema within a larger discourse about trauma and witnessing was arguably important to a politics of representation in an era where people with AIDS were erased (and arguably still erased) from the larger culture. The most obvious example of this erasure is Ronald Reagan's, the Great Communicator's, refusal to acknowledge the extent of the crisis from the first known outbreak in 1981, until 1987, when he appointed the Watkins council to attend to the epidemic, a year after Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, a little too late, issued his report that preventative sex education could curb the spread of the virus. During this time (1981-1987), more than 40,000 Americans had died of AIDS-related complications, and more than 70,000 people were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Indeed, American AIDS cinema, through the evocation of the audience-as-witness, called for a greater visibility of those who suffered from AIDS (and by extension, the queer people often associated with AIDS at the time) within mainstream culture. However, it is highly questionable how effective this increase of "visibility" is (and was) in creating true social change.

Increasing the number of ways that queer people who suffer from AIDS are represented does fulfill an important function: the expansion of the discourses redistributes power, indeed, and within the cultural and historical narratives surrounding the 1980's and 1990's AIDS crisis in the U.S., the ACT

UP “we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it” as well as the “silence=death” rhetorics, the seeming turn toward safe-sex education, condom use, humanizing the disease, etc., seems to be the reward for this expansion of representation ( as I argue elsewhere, using Foucault and post-colonial theory, that the silence has returned to the Western discussion of AIDS as those-who-suffer are recharacterized as “other-there”--Africa--rather than “we-here”--the U.S. and Western Europe. This global silencing, coupled with the Bush Administration’s foreign policy, certainly *does* equal death.) Co-existent events contribute to the U.S. government’s getting on board with AIDS prevention, research, and treatment, the most obvious being when documented cases of HIV infection and AIDS started to surface among white, heterosexual, middle class Americans. The politics of representation does little to create true political change, as with movement in the simulated democracy that we call home, the oppressed are subject to “trickle down social justice” (a la Reagan’s “trickle down economics”) masked as political agency. The activism of ACT UP, or the QLF (Queer Liberation Front) should not be dismissed. On the contrary, the activism of ACT UP, QLF, the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, and other groups as calling forth a futurity not bound within a politics of representation. Yet such activism is usually framed within a representative model when pushed out through mainstream media.

The AIDS crisis as both historical and ongoing, yet, importantly, attention must be paid to how we look at “crisis” and “trauma” before we discuss how the

cultural production that emerges from the AIDS crisis of the 80's and 90's evokes the act of witnessing, both as representation and as liberation.

Agamben writes:

... the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, bios and zoe, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction,

(HS 9).

Agamben's indistinction is the basis for modern subjectivity, within which (citizen/outlaw, life/death, survivor/victim) the *homo sacer* emerges; it is the basis for Agamben's thought that points toward a radical utopian model. The stateless refugee, the political prisoner, the gay man dying in the AIDS ward, are without community, yet indicate a "coming community"--a community of the rightless, of the missing, to which anyone could possibly belong. This coming community is not as simple as margin-to-center identity politics of the 80's and 90's, as margin-to-center does nothing to alter the structure of the very system that oppresses and casts out its citizens. Margin-to-center identity politics remains trapped within representative models with its insistence on widening norms to include characteristics of the "other" within the norm. The problem with this mode of

thinking is that it utilizes “trickle down social justice” methods, as oppressed folks wait in the queue to be recognized as “human.”

AIDS cinema is the cinema of the *homo sacer*, the rightless, the excommunicated. AIDS cinema is also framed as a cinema of trauma, of suffering. Trauma studies of the Holocaust have heavily explored the witness as central figure in crisis or traumatic situations. Primo Levi’s paradox of the witness asks the question of how a true witness can exist: “We, the survivors are not the true witnesses...we survivors are not only an exiguous but also anomalous minority. We...did not touch bottom. Those who did so, who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the ‘Muslims’, the submerged, the complete witnesses...” (83-84). Because those who did so have yet to return, no “true” witnesses exist. Agamben does some important work with configuring the witness in his *Remnants of Auschwitz* that I will attend to below, but first Roger Hallas makes an important point about Levi’s paradox that is crucial to a study of the witness in AIDS cinema. Hallas states, “Whereas Holocaust studies have stressed the psychic and historical impossibility of bearing witness to the event as it occurred, queer cultural practices of bearing witness to AIDS were widely performed during the traumatic intensity of the gay male epidemics in the global North, affording quite different engagements with traumatic temporality” (4).

Hallas notes that the culture that emerged around the AIDS crisis in the 1980’s and 1990’s was structured around immediacy rather than inaccessibility. Hallas has an important point with his discussion of immediacy,



as there was a greater permeability of experience, as cultural products like film, paintings, graphic design, and performance emerged from the crisis in “real” time, at the moment of the crisis, which allowed for a different kind of witness to emerge. Hallas also notes that the AIDS crisis necessitated the creation of alternate life worlds, as new solidarities had to be formed (between gay hustlers and non-white IV drug users, for example) and with the larger culture’s silence and inaction during the outbreak of the crisis, self-determination was key in the mutual support that emerged from the crisis. However, Hallas returns to a politics of representation by invoking the cultural products that emerged from the crisis as widening representation of people with AIDS for political purposes. Though widening the field of representation, mainstream films about AIDS don’t necessarily shake the oppressive foundation of the political state.

It is perhaps dangerous to directly transpose conceptual frameworks from an understanding of one historical trauma to another historical trauma. However, shared characteristics as well as differences inform the conceptualization of trauma and the role of the witness from one historical trauma to the next. Important to the study of both the Holocaust and the AIDS crisis and how the witness functions in both is Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz*. An extended meditation on Levi’s paradox and the role of ethics, *Remnants of Auschwitz* is as enigmatic and as instructive as *The Coming Community*. Key to this study in this work is Agamben’s discussion of the remnant. The remnant indicates the shifting and complex gaps between the part and the whole. The remnant is the “redemptive machine” that allows for the salvation of the whole

from which it emerges, as it signifies loss and the division between whole and part (162). For Agamben's study of Auschwitz, the remnant is not those who died in the gas chambers, nor is it those who survived the camps, but those which remains in the space between/among the drowned and the saved.

Reading Agamben's discussion of the remnant alongside Foucault's discussion of authorship in "What is an Author?" Foucault breaks down the notion of the author as a historical subject with a "proper" name, and instead discusses how the author is produced through intersecting discourses and systems of power and production. So, rather than determining the author as a person, Foucault re-envision the author function as performing a task in discourse that is contingent on discourse and power relations. The witness function is a virtual third position between/among the watching-subject and the suffering-object within AIDS cinema. Between/among, as the virtual witness functions in an assemblage with watcher, sufferer, and discourse, rather than at a midpoint between two binary "opposites" of sufferer and watcher, or between art and discourse. The witness does not merely watch, but functions to frame the experience discursively through discourse. This virtual witness is neither the drowned sufferer/victim nor the saved watcher/survivor/audience, but a function that emerges from the film itself. The purpose of the virtual witness function is to not only frame the what is being watched within a particular discourse, but the characteristics of this witness are configured by what/who is being watched and the discourse from which the virtual witness emerges, as the author function works within Foucault's writing. The "virtuality" of the witness is that of the

remnant, between/among the whole and the part, between/among the victim/survivor, citizen/outlaw, the potentiality embedded within the impotentiality of the people who are missing. It is not possible to locate the virtual witness function using linear temporality or physical geography. How the virtual witness function is called forth in AIDS cinema emerges from the film itself. The virtual witness function can only evoke a radical queer futurity as part of an assemblage of aesthetic, intended audience, sufferer, and watcher.

As artists and filmmakers struggled to make sense of the AIDS crisis, a number of films arose, most of which never hit the mainstream. *Philadelphia* (1993) was one of the few films that surfaced during this time that was created for, and marketed to, a mainstream audience. The film was made by a heterosexual director and featured a mostly heterosexual cast. Tom Hanks won the Oscar for Best Actor in his role as Andrew Beckett, the dying lawyer who sues his firm for discrimination. Bruce Springsteen won the Oscar for his hit, "Streets of Philadelphia." The film was widely reviewed and watched, and was one of the top-grossing films of 1993 (<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=philadelphia.htm>).

Two particular scenes in order to show how the film works to reify a politics of representation, thus occluding the possibility of the virtual witness to emerge. The first is the hospital scene. The sufferer is Andrew Beckett, who is in the end-stages of complications due to AIDS. He lies on a hospital bed, surrounded by friends and family. Denzel Washington, who plays Joe Miller, the once-but-no-longer homophobic and AIDSphobic lawyer who represents Beckett

in his lawsuit, visits Beckett to discuss their winning of the case. During this scene, Miller is optimistic with their win, but this optimism is tinged with grief over what the audience already knows is the inevitable result of Beckett's hospitalization: death. Over the course of the film, Miller's character undergoes a didactic transformation from hater to friend, from ignorance to understanding. During this scene, we see a close-up of Miller gingerly touching Beckett's face as he readjusts Beckett's oxygen mask. This not-so-subtle close-up recalls Miller's earlier reluctance to touch anyone with AIDS for fear of contracting the disease. Miller assures Beckett that he will see him later, something the audience has been prepared to see as impossible, and leaves the room. The audience itself is positioned in this scene as onlooker to the suffering/dying Beckett and the watching/surviving Miller. The tenderness with which Miller touches Beckett is prosthetic in that Miller accomplishes what the film sets the audience up to desire: an act of kindness bestowed upon the objectified, suffering Beckett.

The film occludes the evocation of the virtual witness through the simultaneous reinstatement of the norm (Beckett is a white, upper-class, homonormative lawyer with a loving family and community), the larger cultural silence and erasure of people with AIDS, and the film's larger, obvious, didactic call to understanding. Through this scene, the film moves to both inspire understanding through objectifying pity and to call the audience to action through the politics of representation. The politics of representation are reified in this scene as Beckett's character's impending death serves to swell outrage at the

injustice of homophobia and discrimination against people with AIDS, while simultaneously making the case for including white, upper-class, family men like Beckett into the realm of the “human.” The “success” of the lesson hinges on the audience’s ability to normalize Beckett (and by extension, people like Beckett). The facility with which the film allows the audience to achieve success within the lesson reveals the occlusion of the virtual witness. Had this film been about a Chicano transvestite IV drug user, it is unlikely the film-as-such would be able to call forth a humanizing solution through the politics of representation.

In addition to the hospital scene, the final scene of the film, Beckett’s funeral, supports the politics of representation, as we see the camera pan a large gathering of (mostly white) people wearing red ribbons, eating and socializing together as a community. The presence of (mostly) heterosexual couples also supports homonormative ideologies (“they are just like us”) and advances the “case” for inclusion into the human in a racist, classist, heterosexist system. Further, Beckett’s character is not allowed to remain sick and dying (or, at this point, dead) in the minds of the audience, because the camera focuses in on a television set displaying home movies of Beckett as a (healthy) child. Even white, upper-class, homonormative Beckett needs “help” being inducted into the human. His sick and dying body is not allowed to be our last image of him. He comes “full circle” and “returns” to a healthy past through the home videos of his childhood. Sure this is the cotton candy effect of blockbuster Hollywood films, but there is something deeper at work here too: the film calls forth a re-presentation of AIDS victims as sanitized and acceptable in order to argue for

justice on their behalf, through traditional means of representation in this simulated democracy. The audience is called to actualize their potential for political participation through existing structures.

Released just two years after *Philadelphia*, Marlon Riggs' documentary *Black Is, Black Ain't* evokes the virtual witness function by probing the caesuras between sufferer and survivor, thus, performing the remnant role. The virtual witness function also calls forth the community-to-come in this film by revealing the impotentiality of the people who are missing: those who are victimized by structural racism, homophobia, and economic injustice. *Black Is, Black Ain't* is the last documentary Riggs made before his death from complications due to AIDS in 1994 (it was finished by his collaborators Nicole Atkinson and Christiane Badgley and was released in 1995). In this documentary, Riggs explores the complexity of black identity in America, as it intersects with his queer identity, his rural southern upbringing and his urban identity as an academic and artist. At once critical and creative, gestural and empirical, *Black Is, Black Ain't* provides a rich intersectional exploration of identity, sexuality, illness, and death. The documentary follows Riggs as he searches for the ever-elusive black identity. From South Carolina to L.A. to New Orleans, Riggs travels and he speaks to people all over the country about what black is...or isn't. The depth of the story comes from Riggs' self-exploration of his sexuality, homophobia and acceptance within black communities, and the effects of AIDS on his body and in the larger community. In this film, Riggs' body deteriorates, and a number of scenes feature his hospitalization.

One of the more resonant scenes in the documentary is Riggs' hospitalization and his musing about his work, and his passion for his art, alongside his thinking about his death. The scene opens with a shot of Riggs running naked through the woods. He is asked to comment on his dreams, where he relays a dream about Harriet Tubman, who leads him across a raging river in the middle of the forest. This story of the dream is told in voice-over, as the audience sees a montage of images of Tubman, images of the river, and images of the forest. The next image is of Riggs in his hospital bed. He says, "I am not going to die, because work is the living spirit within me, that which wants to connect with other people, and pass on something to them that they can use in their own lives and grow from" and then he pauses in what seems to be a moment of reflective silence. What follows is him discussing what he wants to have happen when he becomes too sick to work any longer: "I know there will come a time and I won't be able to get up out of this bed and all we can do is take me home and let me lie on my bed and I can look out the window and it may reach a point where I can't even open up my eyes and I'm lying there and I want my mother and my grandmother and Jack to be there to hold my hand and to rub my head and feet and let me die." While Riggs speaks, there is a recording of Linda Tillery and the Harriet Tubman Underground Freedom Train Singers rendition of "I Shall Not Be Moved," a spiritual (*I shall not, I shall not be moved/ Just like a tree that's standing by the water/ I shall not be moved*) playing. The song is known for its use during the Civil Rights Movement, and for its many adaptations for social justice causes over the years. The image of Riggs' face in

the hospital fades to an image of the river, and the film bursts into an ebullient Cajun song.

The virtual witness function is evoked in this scene, by contrast to the scene in *Philadelphia* in a number of ways: the way time is treated in the scene subverts linearity, and resists chronopolitics, thus highlighting potentiality as not something that is “used up” in order to “achieve” the real, but a potentiality that exists within impotentiality; the evocation of the missing people through the intertextual treatment of resistance to slavery (with the image of Harriet Tubman) and the resistance to the contemporary legacy of slavery (the structural racism that gave rise to the Civil Rights movement, and that which motivated Riggs to make the documentary); and, the layering of narrative, song, and image alludes to one of the main points of the film, the collective utterance. Because the film does not allow us to revert to a healthier Riggs at the end, and due to our understanding that he did not survive to see the final edit of the film, in the film, Riggs becomes a figure suspended between drowned/saved, between death/life. The image of Harriet Tubman and the theme of crossing opens up space for radical queer futurity, as we are there but not-quite-there at the same time. *Black Is, Black Ain't* allows space for the virtual witness to emerge, and does not allow itself to be trapped within the didactic “lesson” of *Philadelphia*, where the suggested action must occur within a politics of representation.

David Wojnarowicz’s short film *Fire in My Belly: A Work in Progress* (1986-87) is a short silent film reportedly inspired by Diamanda Galas’ “This is



the Law of the Plague,” a musical composition that reinvents and remixes passages from Leviticus and Psalms to critique the structural homophobia, classism, and racism that contributed to the silence and inaction during the height of the AIDS crisis in the U.S. Wojnarowicz made the film in response to the cultural silence about the AIDS crisis, the religious right’s relentless portrayal of AIDS as “punishment” for homosexuality as well as to memorialize his partner, Peter Hujar. Wojnarowicz died in 1992, of AIDS-related complications.

Wojnarowicz’s film, with its stark images of ants crawling on a crucifix (as a symbol of colonial Catholicism, or an evocation of the return to the earth and nature in death), the chaotic streets of Mexico city (resistance within a colonial city), male-bodied erotic pleasure (a site of potentiality), blood (the flesh that connects us), money (the devastating effect of capitalism that hinders access to a viable life), the meat industry, and puppetry (the reduction to the bare life), not only delivers a cogent analysis of the brutality of existence under Empire, but also evokes an alternate view to homonormativity (the sick body as site for erotic pleasure, the hustler as prophet, etc.) that stands in stark contrast to the normalizing narrative of *Philadelphia*. Like with *Black Is, Black Ain’t*, the virtual witness function emerges through the film’s resistance to linearity, its layering of images, and its critique of the intersections between colonization, medicalization, homophobic violence through silence, and its critique of censorship, as the political arises through the aesthetic, as the film creates space for the virtual witness function to emerge.

In his journal, Wojnarowicz writes, "Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference; thus each public disclosure of a fragment of private reality serves as a dismantling tool against the illusion of ONE-TRIBE NATION; it lifts the curtains for a brief peek and reveals the probable existence of literally millions of tribes" (121). These "millions of tribes" are the darkness, the multitude, the "missing people" called forth in his film. By breaking linear time to call forth the colonized, the forgotten, the "bad gays" who are openly erotic in the midst of the plague, Wojnarowicz's film steps toward the missing people as they step toward him, in the Deleuzian sense. His film is also a sort of crossing, crossing geographic boundaries, linear forms of time, and false restrictions on the body's morphology. This "brief peek" into the "probable existence of literally millions of tribes" hints at Derrida's trace, or the Agamben's potentiality within impotentiality (enforced passivity), a radical queer futurity.

Queer theory's ability to be a mode that unsettles space and time, political and geographic boundaries, the public/private binary, and constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, allows, through this mode of analysis for a radical futurity to emerge. As an active resistance to the politics of representation, the films of Riggs and Wojnarowicz "undo" these boundaries, binaries, and constructions, allowing the virtual witness function to emerge to reveal this glimpse of the multitude, the community-to-come, that is always already here.

CODA:

The virtual witness function is not something only seen in AIDS cinema of the 1990s. *Fig Trees* (John Greyson, 2009) is a documentary opera based on the friendship between activists Zachie Achmat (S. Africa) and Tim McCaskell (Canada) and weaves together a complex story of multinational corporations, politics, queer life, and living with AIDS to culminate in a multi-vocal (literally), multi-media exploration of the contemporary global AIDS crisis. One of the framing structures of the film is Virgil Thompson and Gertrude Stein's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Though sometimes playful, the film explores Stein and Thompson as both historical and contemporary, and situates the performance of their opera as both inspiration and fodder for critique, thus bending linear time. Much of what happens in this film obscures the present/past distinction in form and in content.

The virtual witness functions most dramatically in the "Four Throats" aria and "Zackie's Aria," both highly stylized and intense musically. In the "Four Throats" aria the audience is confronted with four activists who have died of AIDS-related complications from all over the world and from different eras. Their voices mingle eerily into once palindromic song and the effect of this intertwining musically and visually breaks down the concept of the "one tribe" and hints at a multitude of voices. The genius of this aria is that though the voices overlap and sometimes seemingly "make no sense" the result is a beautiful cacophony.

"Zackie's Aria" is another pivotal scene in the film. It is shot from four perspectives: a video interview with Zackie Achmat about his refusal to take retrovirals until they are made available to all South Africans, an actor playing

Zackie on a stage, a filmmaker filming the stage performance, and the process of translation of Zackie's interview. This act of translation, along with the multitude of views of essentially the same interview allows the political to emerge from the aesthetic, much like Riggs' montage with Harriet Tubman.

John Greyson's ability to experiment with time, form and function in his filmmaking continue the conversation started by filmmakers like Riggs and Wojarnowicz, probing the question of who gets to live in an era where multinational corporations control patents on life-saving drugs. John Greyson also continues the interrogation of what "success" means in terms of queer life. Is a successful life only that which is long? What does that say for the people (the multitude) who do not survive AIDS? Greyson is central to reimagining success and triumph in contemporary film about HIV and AIDS.

### **Chapter 3: Homonormativity and the Violence of the Geographic Solution**

In order to be represented, or recognized as citizen-subjects, one must assimilate into the dominant order. The politics of representation, though not inherently "bad," are based on an assimilationist ethos, and therefore erase non-normative queer people. The rubric of gay marriage or the repeal of DADT, does little or nothing for those outside of those neoliberal systems, and certainly does very little, if anything, to shift the interlocking systems of domination (patriarchy,

white supremacy, etc.) that constitute structural violence. This focus on marriage and military service, as well as the focus on the “gay family” and the solidification/gentrification of the “gayborhood” function within neoliberal consumerist paradigms that do not allow space for non-normative ways of existence, identity-formation, erotic interaction, or gender expression.

The mainstream institutions of marriage, family, and state function within the framework of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism refers to the turn-of-the-millennium strategy of privatization of historically “public” enterprises (education, human services, etc.) and this privatization places the “human” into the “profit-making” sphere. This privatized, profit-driven sphere, where individual “freedoms” are connected to constructions of productivity, efficiency, and the expansion of wealth, is a powerful construction rather than a concrete historical phenomenon. This construction is what drives the mistaken conflation of consumer choices with political choices as well as what drives the homonormative impulse. This homonormative impulse is oddly aligned with more conservative politics with its focus on normative/family-oriented kinship formations “associated with domestic partnership, adoption, military service, and gender-normative social roles” which “work to disempower those who challenge serial monogamy... and those who are seen as eccentric within a traditional binary gender or sex system” (Murphy, Ruiz, and Serlin 5). Similar rhetorics are deployed around the institution of the heteropatriarchal family to both frame the argument for gay marriage and adoption and to resist gay marriage and adoption.

Homonormativity is, as Lisa Duggan defines, “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179). Homonormativity is embedded in the politics of representation as well as in what Butler calls the “politics of recognition” creating recognizable citizen-subjects as white, middle class, male. If one is not recognized, one is erased, not-quite-human, and certainly questionable as an appropriate citizen-subject. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler argues that “the terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable. And sometimes the very terms that confer ‘humanness’ on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human...The human is understood differentially depending on its race, the legibility of that race, its morphology, the recognizability of that morphology, its sex, the perceptual verifiability of that sex, its ethnicity, the categorical understanding of that ethnicity. Certain humans are recognized as less than human, and that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life” (2).

For example, when one sees someone on the street who is “gender ambiguous” one clicks into the gendering process in order to render the person as “recognizable” as “human.” The same happens with other identity categories as they are mapped onto the body like constructions of race (“Tell me where you’re from. No really. Where you’re from...”) or class (When I’m waiting tables

folks often ask me what my “real” job is.). Homonormativity is a form of structural violence, as it renders bodies and subjectivities outside this system of norms influenced by neoliberal politics as unrecognizable, thus erased/marginalized. If one is not recognized as “human” or as an “appropriate” citizen-subject, then the right to live and to thrive is, at best, not discussed or accounted for, and at worst, purposefully elided (this calls to mind the criminalization of certain queer sexualities, or the way that the prison-industrial complex normalizes sexual and other types of violence within its walls, or the way that we construct a “they” who must labor for our clothes and food or who must die in our wars, etc.).

Focusing on homonormativity-as-violence is not but so popular, as one could argue that this position “splits the community” and that LGBTQ folk have fought to be “inside” the system and therefore expand/change the system merely by being there. While this idea rings with a certain type of legitimacy within the neoliberal framework, assimilationist politics are not truly an emancipatory or intersectional route. People must to be careful in how they construct “community” within a politic, as there have always been those who are “outside” this imagined “queer community.”

Homonormativity in its neoliberal structural violence serves the needs and desires of imperialism and structural racism. An intersectional argument shows how homonormativity is complicit with the edification of the nation-state and the practice of structural violence through the prison-industrial complex (both within the U.S. borders, and outside, as deployed through extraordinary rendition,

indeterminable detainment, and global warfare) as well as through global imperialist practice.

Homonormativity is based on enemy production. Enemy production is two-fold, external (“terrorist”) and internal (“criminal” or “illegal alien”). This enemy production functions on a false promise of safety and security in exchange for collusion with state violence and the late capitalist free-market economy that drives the imperial project. The way that homonormativity comes into play here is that its assimilationist politic buys into the false promise of safety and security through collusion with the state in the form of state-sanctioned kinship, military service, and the uncritical support of a capitalist economy. This promise of safety and security is a seductive one, as the promise to the end of pain, marginalization, and violence for some of us is a strong motive. Who wants to “return” to the “realm of the hated, the despised, the killable, and the disposable”? (ABS 129). This “cost of belonging” however, is collusion with the imperial project. The logic of safety and security in exchange for collusion with empire and structural racism/classism is what drives the assimilationist politic of homonormativity.

The question, of course, is who *gets* to be safe and secure? Who *gets* to leave the realm of the hated/despised/killable/disposable? So, it is impossible to divorce the politics of recognition which create appropriate “humans” and thus citizen-subjects from the politics of assimilation and collusion with empire building and structural racism/classism. Further, the “freedom” of the first-world middle class queer is built from the “raw material” of imperialism, as “democracy” and



“freedom” are measured against the backdrop of how the “other’s” “non-freedom” is constructed. A non-freedom in which U.S. culture is complicit in this constructing. The assimilationist “gay civil rights” movement rhetoric cannot be divorced from larger questions of agency, freedom, and human rights not only globally, but also within our borders. It is important not to merely construct a rural/urban binary as a way to frame queer existence and constructions of geographic location, but to see how metronormativity, homonormativity, and larger structural systems of violence are connected and function in a constellation with one another.

## **The Erasure of Rurality in the Formation of the Homonormative Queer**

### **Subject**

This topic for me is personal in that I was raised in rural areas all up and down the east coast, as my family moved to find work. I spent most of my time in rural upstate NY, but lived for a time in southwest VA. When I first started to realize that I didn’t fit into heterosexual norm, I thought I might be the only one (except for Alex, who starred in the HBO drama, “The Truth About Alex,” a story about how coming out leads to struggle and sadness that aired in the mid-80’s and perhaps Morrissey, but he was evading the question of his sexuality at the time). I guess my point is that it wasn’t until I moved to a more urban area (the sprawling metropolis of Allentown, PA) that I came into contact with anyone who was “like me,” whatever that meant. Because my early life vacillated between remote rural areas and northern working class towns, it was a strange move for me to come to Richmond, VA, for a number of reasons (the capital of the

Confederacy, its size, etc.). I was shocked to see that there was actually a lesbian bar and a thriving scene in Richmond for queer folks (if you have money and drink, that is). Importantly, I had never thought that there WAS a queer existence in the smaller towns and rural areas where I grew up. I thought I had finally “made it” and could “finally be myself.” I tell this story because I think that the mythology surrounding queer existence and visibility is deeply ingrained, so much so that it seems “natural.” The idea that the only safe place for a queer existence is in this mythological urban land influenced my thinking for a number of years.

After seeing the documentary “Small Town Gay Bar” in 2008, I was shocked at the level of disbelief in many of the reviews I read. Much of the commentary I read was either lauding the Mississippians as being “brave” for opening bars in their towns or dismissing the film because the film didn’t really address why folks STAYED in their small towns (and I wanted that too, but for different reasons). “Why not just move?” was a prevalent reaction to the film, which reminded me of reactions to other somewhat mainstream depictions of rural queer life (*Boys Don’t Cry*, “The Laramie Project”, etc.). This mythology of the “geographic solution” (why not just move) contributes to a larger structure of violence, for it places the onus of violence that happens in rural areas on the victims of violence, erases the fact that homophobic/transphobic violence exists in urban areas, and helps construct rural areas as dangerous and “leave-able” which, of course, contributes to the larger erasure of issues particular to rural folks (economic devastation, environmental disaster, immigration rights, etc.).

The notion that the geographic solution only indicates a move from the rural to the urban is also a powerful mythology, as it doesn't account for migration *within* urban areas. The dependency of the rural/urban split on the binary constructions of knowledge and meaning erase practices of migration within urban areas as well as larger questions about the reasons and conditions for the movement of bodies across (real and imagined) borders. This ideology of the rural/urban split and the necessity of the geographic solution also contributes to enemy production, as it stereotypes rural folks as white and lower-class, backward and unsophisticated and erases the racial/ethnic diversity found in rural areas by constructing rural areas as white and/or as "leave-able." If one does not leave, then one must not be worthy of leaving (which, also, contributes to the neoliberal notions of personal agency and freedom; poverty is a personal problem, not a structural one). Also, this mythology constructs rural bodies as bodies who labor and bodies who fight for our country, not subjects capable of thought, organizing, and resistance. The rural/urban split and the myth of the geographic solution also works to fetishize rural queer identities as "quaint" or to imagine rural areas as places where urban middle class queers can "escape" the "stresses" of city life. Additionally, because minority histories and narratives often depend on the stories of a few exceptional people, there hasn't (until recently) been much study of how communities work, particularly how queer/trans identities function in rural spaces as well as marginalized urban/suburban spaces.

This lack of attention to rural spaces, I believe, is due to another powerful myth: that there is no community in rural spaces, folks move to the city to *find community*. As Halberstam argues, “Community models are offered only as a generalized model of many individuals rather than as a complex interactive model of space, embodiment, locality, and desire” (45). When thinking of communities only as collections of individuals, we are unable to see the larger structural complexities at work, unable to see how these structural elements are in flux and intersect with one another. Mary Gray argues that community is constructed across space and time, online and offline, in churches, schools, and other spaces, not just a collection of individuals in the Castro, the Village, or West Hollywood. As Gray argues in her book, *Out in the Country*, the application of metronormative, middle-class ideologies of community-formation to rural areas is inaccurate at best. What a “community” looks like varies from geographic location to geographic location, and further, not all rural areas are “the same” and cannot be seen as monolithic.

At root of this geographic solution is metronormativity, the idea that if something is worth happening, it’s happening in the city, which pervades all culture, not just queer subcultures, although it is particularly resonant with LGBTQ people. Judith Halberstam describes metronormativity as a term that “reveals the conflation with ‘urban’ and ‘visible’ in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities. Such narratives tell of closeted subjects who ‘come out’ into an urban setting, which in turn, supposedly allows for full expression of the sexual self in relation to a community of other gays/lesbians/queers”

(36). Mary Gray sees cities as “imagined to draw out and bind together the nameless throngs of same-sex desiring and gender-variant people to build visibility and political power” (7). This model, in turn, also has economic ramifications, as if the city is the space where queers come to buy into the promise of safety and security in numbers, then it follows that their money comes with them. Gray does an excellent analysis of how mainstream LGBT activist organizations are located within cities and concentrate their politics in metronormative ways. We can see this metronormative concentration with the HRC campaigns, which situate queer subjects in urban upper/middle class environments. The urban environment is where the politics of representation is located, not only in the symbolic realm of our imaginations but also in the concrete ways LGBTQ non-profit cash is spent.

For example, in 2006, the Virginia State Legislature voted on adding an amendment to the VA State Constitution that defined marriage as between a man and a woman (which easily passed). In the months leading up to the vote, the HRC and other national non-profits flooded the state with field organizers to get citizens to oppose the amendment. Many of these organizers worked in rural areas in western and southern Virginia. Once the amendment passed, HRC pulled its field organizers out of the states, to concentrate on other geographic areas where legalizing marriage between same-sex partners was more viable. Though this desertion might not surprise most, as other large national non-profit organizations have similar tactics, if one looks more closely, one can see the

long-reaching effects of such a move. Hermelinda Cortes, a field organizer for SONG (Southerners on New Ground, a group that will be discussed below), in an interview, said that even five years later, it is difficult to organize LGBTQ people in rural areas in Virginia, as they feel used by the HRC and “left behind” to work on more “worthy” causes. During the amendment push, HRC organizers encouraged rural white people and people of color to “come out” to support the opposition of the proposed amendment, thus putting an already vulnerable group of people on the spot. When the HRC pulled their field organizers, it left people in these underserved areas feeling abandoned, and reluctant to do any political action, even on their own terms, as is the SONG model. Demanding that a particular group fit a homonormative framework in order to be “viable” as citizen-subjects commits an act of structural violence on such a group, as it does not take into account the particular ways in which such a group might be vulnerable to violence. In a way, the HRC's organizing strategy lines right up with the capitalist model, using poor rural white people, immigrants, and people of color as “raw material” for the larger movement to legalize marriage. This suspicion of the metronormative model, and of field organizers who come to work in rural areas is not an unfounded suspicion, nor is it difficult to understand then. In addition, the HRC annual budget exceeds \$17M, and has been reported as high as \$41M ([www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org)). In an informal survey of Virginia LGBTQ organizations, access to a small fraction of such funding could almost double the number of resource centers, youth shelters and programs, and health clinics in the state.

In addition, there is an uncritical acceptance of “coming out” into an urban space as the ONLY way to be appropriately queer. To “come out” implies a supportive community of people. “Coming out” also has a particular look to it, and it is within the impulse to “come out” to be politically represented we see the assimilationist homonormative impulse. To be able to “come out” necessitates a certain privilege, and it can be argued that homonormativity functions within the binary of in/out in that “coming out” only has political relevance if the person who is “out” is appropriately queer. Trans identities and non-white, non-able-bodied, and non-middle/upper class identities (or any intersection of those categories) are not as acceptable in the “coming out” paradigm, as it threatens the assimilationist “legitimacy” of the homonormative politics of representation. When looking at how geographic location influences the “coming out” narrative, we also see that “being out” means different things in different areas. For example, how it’s possible for the “town queer” to live and thrive within a homophobic environment merely because they belong to the community. Mary Gray notes that there are three necessary conditions that need to be present for a queer-identified individual to reach the point of coming out: privacy to explore self-perceived difference, a visible community that one is able to see and be seen by, and a safe space in which queer difference can be acted out without fear (Gray 5). In rural settings these conditions become muddled and have to be dealt with in different manners for individuals to negotiate their desires. This is brought about not only because of the differences in queer

communities between the urban and the rural, but also because of the different broader patterns of social interaction between the urban and the rural as a whole.

The metronormative idea of “being in the closet” as shameful is problematic because of the way that it imposes an urban sense of “community” (which is, in itself, raced and classed) on other community structures. In *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, E. Patrick Johnson collects narratives by black gay southern men about their experiences. One section of *Sweet Tea* is dedicated entirely to coming out and reveals the different strategies used by these men as a way of coming out to their families. While these coming out narratives do reveal that these men did in fact decide to “leave the closet,” their individual stories reveal how their own conceptions of the closet were not congruent with those held by urban queer communities. In fact, these narratives singularly reveal coming out in the South to be a personal process rather than a political one, as the community structure within which one “comes out” is radically different in different geographic locations, a fact that most queer scholars and political activists overlook.

Along with geographic concerns, Scott Herring discusses metronormativity as raced and classed: “To the racial and corporeal norms of such privileged whiteness, we could add the socioeconomic norms of the middle classes and the aesthetic norms of urbanity, sophistication, and cosmopolitanism, or what is often referred to as “trendy fashion,” “chic,” “style,” or “lifestyle.” Together these four interlocking aspects of metronormativity—the narratological, the racial, the



socioeconomic, and the aesthetic—reproduce the imaginary geographic ideals of post-Stonewall urbanism for men and women, an urbanism that facilitates the ongoing commodification and depoliticization of U.S.-based queer cultures. Taken as story, style, or both, metronormativity thus buttresses the narratives, customs, and presumptions of many modern U.S. urban gays and lesbians while it simultaneously enables these gays and lesbians to govern the aesthetic, erotic, material, and affective imaginaries of many modern queers, irrespective of “country,” “town,” or somewhere in between” (Herring). Implicit in Herring’s intersectional argument about metronormativity is also a critique of homonormativity, as Matthew Bernstein Sycamore also mentions in a 2008 interview for *Radical History Review*:

“[San Francisco’s Gay Shame] ended up becoming a direct-action group that centered on challenging the hypocrisy of a mainstream gay elite that sees their desires as everyone’s needs. It was our goal to challenge the violence of the happy gay consumer that lies beneath all of those glamorous, sweatshop-produced rainbow flags, Tiffany wedding bands, Grey Goose Cosmo-tinis, and all of the rabid consumption. Beneath all of that is the policing of borders, as if to say, ‘Oh no, we don’t want trannies, we don’t want any of those people of color; we don’t want any homeless people; we don’t want any of those youth...’ The gay elite is perfectly willing to exploit youth and people of color and homeless people when they are useful, but as soon as they are no longer useful, their attitude is

like, 'Oh, we need to beautify this neighborhood,' or it's like, 'Girl! Get off the yellow brick road! These bricks are not made for you!'"

This policing of borders is also what erases queer rural existence. If the yellow brick road of the city is not made for everyone, then certainly the road stops at the outskirts of the city. Mapping a metronormative, raced, and classed identity onto mainstream queer bodies does structural violence to non-urban, non-normative folks through exclusion and erasure on one hand, or through enemy-formation on the other.

Clearly a need for a more intersectional anti-assimilationist study of rurality and queer/trans identities exists. My argument is not that the geographic locations that we consider to be rural are not sites of violence or oppression, but that the myth of the geographic solution erases how interlocking systems of domination are at work in multiple geographic locations, including the city. I emphasize a decolonial queer anti-capitalist critique as a method for breaking these binaries. Additionally, I would like to propose an alternate framework for activism and social justice. The framing question when I consider the alternatives to the assimilationist politics of representation is "Why do we continue to argue for inclusion within a system designed to eradicate most of us?" For me, I see the importance of utopian thought when considering alternatives, and the possible way to get here is through the use of the radical imagination, to consider what is not-quite-yet here and to attempt to see/touch it.

Part of that utopian thinking is considering time and temporality. Judith Halberstam writes, “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience-- namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2). The “paradigmatic markers” are heteronormative and homonormative by having reproductive essentialism at their root. The production of alternative temporalities, like the “ludic temporality” created by drug culture or speed-as-motor-for-alternative-history in the writing of Eileen Myles, allows for alternative ways of imagining time, geography, and community (5).

Giorgio Agamben looks at time in terms of the potential/actual binary that is ever-present in Western thought. Agamben makes an important distinction between a potentiality and a possibility: a potentiality is a mode of nonbeing that is here, but not here, in the present tense. Potentiality is to-come, imminent. Possibility is something that is bound in the linear future, something that might happen, but exists in the notion of presence. Potentiality is important to a configuration of radical futurity, as it illustrates time as non-linear, as the future held in the present, as the tree is held in the acorn, not to unfurl and someday flourish, but as always-already there. Agamben is careful to not limit potentiality to the actual, or to presence, and in fact, discusses potentiality as nonbeing, something we can see, but is not actual, a presence of an absence, (*Potentialities* 179). Agamben also is careful to make the distinction between potentiality as “capacity” and a potentiality that is imbued with its negation (the

ability to *not* do, or to *not* be). Potentiality-as-capacity is the dominant form of potentiality, best illustrated in parent-teacher conferences in elementary schools: “We hope that Rakim lives up to his potential.” Yet, Agamben is more interested in the potentiality that is imbued with its own negation, the ability to *not* do. How can we “see” this potentiality? Agamben asks us to think about how we see the darkness. To experience darkness is to have the potential *not* to see. To experience darkness is to experience potentiality in-itself (181).

This use of the metaphor of darkness is important for reasons outside its simplicity and clarity. Western Enlightenment thought situates knowledge and ignorance in a light/dark binary (“Rakim is such a *bright* student.” or Africa as the “*dark* continent”) By adopting darkness as metaphor for potentiality, Agamben not only critiques this metaphor (as does Irigaray, who shows how darkness is associated with woman, or Toni Morrison, who shows how darkness is associated with the Africanistic “other”), but he also makes an important point about potentiality. If potentiality only existed for its ability to actualize its “opposite” (i.e. darkness exists to actualize light), we would not be able to experience darkness as-such. We would only experience potentiality for the sake of actuality (darkness to actualize light). Being able to see darkness in-itself (not for the purposes of actualizing light), we thus tap into the type of potentiality that is the foundation for Agamben’s utopian thought. This type of potentiality is sensation in-itself, without an external object in the here-and-now (181).

Agamben's emphasis on the negation of potentiality (the ability to *not* do, or the *nonbeing* of potentiality) is also important, as it doesn't privilege the actual, or the teleological movement from potential to actual, which allows for a reconceptualization of time critical to radical futurity. Agamben states that "all potentiality is impotentiality," highlighting the impotentiality at the core of potentiality, a concept important to Agamben's notions of freedom. Agamben states that humans are the only animals capable of their own impotentiality. In other words, what makes us human is our ability to *not* be. This statement deviates from much of Western thought, which, from Aristotle to Marx, valorizes the human potential for action. Agamben writes, "To be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing. To be free is, in the sense we have seen, *to be capable of one's own impotentiality*, to be in relation to one's own privation" (183). The political implications for situating freedom within the capacity for impotentiality is that the potential to *not* be is precisely the condition of actuality, rather than the actual "using up" the potential in order to become "real." By situating the actualization process through the negation of potentiality, Agamben radically alters the way we view development. We no longer have to be seduced by potential-as-capacity (i.e. "That field would be a perfect spot for a Wal-Mart!"). We are freed from linear notions of potential-->actual, which alters not only our conception of time, but space and geographies. Agamben's use of potentiality gives us an opportunity to critique homonormativity and the politics of

representation, particularly within a global context (but there are also local implications).

The “Third World” (as described within a neo-liberal context) exists in a state of non-being, or of non-actuality. Within the traditional linear framework of development, this state of non-being is what allows the neo-liberal project to justify itself to move forward with modern globalization and imperialism, as “actualization” is a goal of the neo-liberal project. To actualize, in this neo-liberal sense, is to take advantage of an area’s “resources” (labor, oil, farmland, etc.) in order to “develop” that area, *for its own good*. One would think that this logic would break down eventually, as the same geographical locations have been “developing” since the first wave of Western European global colonial imperialism of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. These geographic areas never become “actually” developed, which highlights the legacy of the imperial project. The savages have yet to be civilized, thus the imperial project rolls forward. For Agamben, to see potentiality within its capacity to *not* be gives us a radically different way to see the world, not as simple negation (“Hell, no, we won’t go!”), but as a multivalent, three-dimensional view of being that is not bound in linear time or physical space, what Derrida calls the “trace” or what I call “threshold thinking.” The threshold thinking of radical futurity emerges as not bound in linear time or physical space, not bound in the here-and-now of gay pragmatism or the politics of representation, but rather situated in the yet-to-come that is always already here. The notion of “strength in numbers” also breaks down, as

numbers relate to the linear notion of development (the number of protesters indicates number of voters who would put a policy into action, and actualize it).

If we develop a framework for seeing that is not bound in linear notions of potentiality or possibility, that does not depend on the traditional “strength in numbers” to succeed (which, of course, is at the root of American trademark democracy or majority/minority politics), we begin to see how bound in the current system assimilationist politics is. Majority/minority constructions are largely imaginary (as the majority of the world is not white, is not middle/upper class, etc.). So, utopian thinking is not situated in the linear future, but relies on a non-linear concept of time, location, and possibility to thrive. So often we get burned out in our thinking and activism dwelling on how we can make it to an actualized future freedom within the current system rather than imagining, theorizing, and making the better world that is already here. As Mary Gray argues, we need to formulate a more nuanced view of rural life, and as Halberstam argues, look more dynamically at how communities are constructed and how they function. We also, I think, when doing activist research and work around these issues, must be mindful of how (what I call) the politics of representation (arguing for visibility and legitimacy through assimilationist practices) reinforce a structurally violent system of white supremacy, economic oppression, and colonialism. Homonormativity, entrenched in rationalist thoughts of linear “progress” and “strength in numbers” (in a pseudo-democratic representational sense), upholds racist heteropatriarchy, as the goal is assimilation into existing structures rather than liberation from such

structures. Homonormativity drives the politics of representation, as the politics of representation demand that in order to be represented, one must assimilate. For rural queers, it is impossible to assimilate into this structure. In order to formulate a truly liberationist politics, we must find another framework. One group that does such work is SONG (Southerners on New Ground). Their organizing strategy and ethos frames intersectional, coalitional, and non-metronormative ways of organizing. Their mission statement reflects such intersectional anti-assimilationist politics:

**Redemption:** because we believe that while the South is a physical geography of white supremacy and poverty and how they form plantations, road, mountain top removal, and slave labor; it is also more than that. It is a place of redemption and hope for many—a place where folk reconcile with past in an honest and painful way, a place where people can stay in lands riddled with pain and remember old traditions, and birth new ways.

**Belief in Those Left Behind:** because while we have been underfunded, lacking in infrastructure, brutalized by poverty, racism, homophobia, transphobia and all manners of oppression; Movement People in the South have always been fighting (like oppressed people all over the world) to keep our heads up. We have found creative ways, based on kin structures, to push toward liberation. We have not turned our back on food, singing, culture, our elders, our youth, and our craftspeople and



artisans. We find joy in such unlikely places. (<http://southernersonnewground.org/about/why-the-south/>)

SONG's organizational model is one in which organizers are embedded within communities, and develop, over time, a political vision *alongside* community members rather than *for* community members, taking into account the specific ways in which LGBTQ folks struggle from place to place. SONG also appropriately overtly recognizes the intersectionality of identity, and wages the movement for human rights to include issues of economy, race, “citizen” status, “ability,” and gender.

Another conceptual model that is helpful in reimagining a radical queer futurity is Dean Spade's notion of “trickle up social justice.” In a talk at Barnard College, Spade outlines their framework for social justice that employs imaginative, utopian thinking in concrete ways. Though seemingly banking (pun intended) on the inverse of the Reaganomics metaphor of “trickle down economics,” Spade is actually pointing to a radically imaginative possibility for conceptualizing social justice. Rather than waiting for the HRC to fund programs for queer and trans homeless youth instead of gay marriage campaigns, activists relocate our focus to the most vulnerable of populations, situating the queer and trans struggles within immigration struggles, anti-imperialist struggles, anti-racist struggles. To focus on how activists can open up new physical and metaphorical spaces for what is not quite here but is already here. The deconstruction of geography, identity, time, and space, and the willingness to step out into

unknown territories is crucial to this concept as is the breakdown of the seeming divide between theory and activism, imagination and action.

#### **Chapter 4: Bodies in Space/Politics of Place: Resisting the Prison-Industrial Complex through Community-Based Writing and Art Making Practice**

*“What is an act of violence that is called torture? Where does it begin? Where does it end? What is the suffering inflicted or undergone in that case? What is its body, its phantasm, its symbol?”*

--Jacques Derrida, from “‘Geopsychoanalysis’ and the rest of the world.”

On June 3, 2011, three plainclothes NYPD officers stopped Alvin Cruz for no apparent reason. Two of the officers questioned and frisked Alvin while the third remained in an unmarked car. Alvin recorded this moment on his phone, and it was published on *The Nation* magazine’s website on October 8, 2012. In this clip, the officers give no legal reason for the stop, make racist comments, and threaten Alvin with violence. According to *The Nation* interview with Alvin, his recounting of the incident includes physical intimidation and violence. He says, “He grabbed me by my bookbag and he started pushing me down. So I’m going backwards like down the hill and he just kept pushing me, pushing me, it looked like he we was going to hit me.” When Alvin asked why he was being stopped, one officer responded, “Because you are a fucking mutt.” This recording made history when it was admitted into evidence during the now-famous NYCLU suit *Floyd vs. City of New York* and was cited in Judge Shira A.

Scheidlin's decision that the stop-and-frisk policy was unconstitutional because of racial profiling.

I began to write this when the NYCLU sued the NYPD for their stop-and-frisk policy. The trial in NYC was already in the works, but testimony hadn't begun when I began to conceptualize this chapter. But as this trial progressed, and eventually decided in the favor of the NYCLU, I felt like it's a good frame for a discussion about the Prison-Industrial Complex. The NYPD is the largest police force in the country, and this trial, for me at least, cuts to the root of how an analysis of race, policing, and prisons fits into a larger discussion of the legacies of colonialism, the American Civil War, and "emancipation." In May of 2012, the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) released the most comprehensive report on the stop-and-frisk policy, with most of the data used in this report taken from NYPD's own records. According to NYCLU lawyers and researchers, every time an NYPD officer makes such a stop, they are required to fill out a report. The statistics that come from these reports show that since 2002, more than 4 million New Yorkers have been stopped and frisked, 9 out of 10 of these New Yorkers who have been stopped have been innocent, according to NYPD's own reports. When we get to the racial and gendered data, it becomes more apparent that we are not living in a colorblind society: 90% of those stopped are of African or "Hispanic" descent, over half of those stopped are between the ages of 14-24, and are overwhelmingly male (more than 90%). Of course, what is even more alarming to activists, researchers, and lawyers is that this data is coming from what is reported through the NYPD

itself. The actual numbers are likely to be higher. Even in overwhelmingly white neighborhoods like Park Slope, Brooklyn, Black and Latino men make up a disproportionate number of stop-and-frisk actions (Park Slope is 76% white, yet Black and Latino men are three times more likely to be stopped and frisked than white folks). (nyclu.org)

Legal scholar Melissa Alexander has done important work tracing the legacies of colonialism and slavery alongside the rise of mass incarceration in her book *The New Jim Crow* (2010). Angela Davis's work showing the role of mass incarceration in the colonial economy through globalization is also important to mention here. Davis's work *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003), pulls together how capitalism grew alongside of racism and colonial globalization, with the prison at its center and posits that a capitalist system *depends* on mass incarceration in order to thrive.

Clearly mass incarceration has an impact on U.S. culture as well. The prison-industrial complex is deeply embedded in all aspects of the culture industry, from "reality" shows like *Locked Up* to mainstream dramas like *CSI* and the *Law and Order* franchises, and even extending to the oh-so-hot Netflix drama, *Orange is the New Black*. Dozens of movies, records, and all types of media are based on criminals, criminality, and the PIC. Therefore, a certain kind of criminality is embedded in the mainstream psyche. That "criminal" is raced, classed, and, as mentioned in Chapter 1, functions as homo sacer.

As mentioned earlier in *Queer Alchemies*, enemy production is key to maintaining empire. This system of enemy-production is how criminality is

created and transmitted in our culture. Even though the majority of the more than 2M people who are incarcerated in the U.S. are incarcerated for non-violent offenses, we still construct the criminal as violent, dangerous, and non-white. So, we have a culture industry that profits from enemy production through a corporatized and intentional rendering of “the criminal” and criminality that encourages the population to disconnect from their empathy and sense of social justice. Through the symbolic, we are embedded in a culture that, at every turn, reifies the notion that people in prisons and detention centers deserve to be there. Enemy-production relies on fear, and fear breeds surveillance. So while Bentham’s panopticon wasn’t a concrete reality during his lifetime, really, the concept remains. We watch each other and police each other because we are told we are being watched by the police. <This camera was installed for your protection>

In addition, a felony conviction causes one to lose many of her rights associated with citizenship. For example, “forty-eight states and the District of Columbia prohibit inmates from voting while incarcerated...and the vast majority of states continue to withhold the right to vote when prisoners are released on parole” (Alexander, 153). Even after parole, a few states deny ex-prisoners the right to vote for a period of time ranging from a few years to life. The Sentencing Project’s report, “Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States” states that “Each state has developed its own process of restoring voting rights to ex-offenders but most of these restoration processes are so cumbersome that few ex-offenders are able to take advantage of them...An estimated 5.3 million

Americans, or one in forty-one adults, have currently or permanently lost their voting rights as a result of a felony conviction” (1). A felony conviction also inhibits people from obtaining public housing, employment, and from accessing other networks of support after being released from jail/prison. So, even after a person is released, having “paid their debt to society,” that person still suffers the effects of prison.

The massive resistance to slavery, segregation, and prisons has been a lived reality for many, from the Underground Railroad and the abolition movement to organized labor resisting convict leasing, to the landmark Supreme Court cases and the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. However, after more than 400 years of structural oppression and state-sponsored violence, and white supremacy in this country is firmly implanted in all legal and social structures, and the prison as a site for apartheid, enemy-production, punishment and free/cheap labor is firmly implanted in multiple, intersecting systems. People of African descent are not the only people swept up into this system historically. From Indian schools and reservations to imprisonment of people resisting colonization of Hawaii and Puerto Rico, to the mass internment of Japanese during the mid-20th century to the contemporary mass internment of undocumented people in the U.S., the structural reach of the PIC extends to every corner of our society.

This is why working in the Richmond City Jail and with “ex-offenders” is so crucial to how I see my activist and academic work. As a gender studies scholar who specializes in decolonial/postcolonial theory I see the obvious legacy of

colonialism and Empire that the prison and the industries that feed and are fed by it demonstrate. More importantly, it is crushing to me to know that in Virginia, one out of 38 adults is incarcerated, which is incredibly high, making Virginia the ninth highest state in the Union for incarceration rates (“Virginia in Comparison with Other U.S. States...”).<sup>f</sup> When I consider my hometown of Richmond, at least 3% of my community is missing (we know that incarceration rates are higher in inner-cities than in rural areas, according to the Prison Policy Initiative). We also know that African-Americans are incarcerated 6 times that of whites, and “Hispanic” people are incarcerated double that of whites, according to the Sentencing Project. Living in an incredibly diverse city, I feel that loss on a gut level.

Before I actually started working in the Richmond City Jail (RCJ), I was opposed to mass incarceration, I wrote letters to inmates, and visited my penpals that were close by. However, nothing could prepare me for the horror, the joy, and the anger that working in a jail every week would bring. It has taken me hours and hours to write this chapter, because I don’t feel I could ever get it right. I can never describe what it feels like to be there, can never describe the bonds that are formed, what happens in that classroom, and what is beginning to happen on the street as a result of the classes inside. But it is important to try write about this, less because it is an illustration of the larger point my dissertation is making, but more so because people need to know. In his essay, “Doing Time, Marking Race,” Wideman writes, “Prisons do their dirtiest work in the dark. The evil they perpetrate depends on a kind of willed ignorance on the



part of the public. To prevent the worst abuses and realign our prison system with enlightened notions of justice and rehabilitation as well as punishment, the public must play an active role: awareness of what happens behind the walls is a crucial step” (Jacobson-Hardy, 13).

There is a risk this kind of writing runs with objectifying incarcerated people. Sometimes called “prison porn,” academic/personal writing about people in prison can create the us vs. them effect, turning people who are incarcerated into a specimen to be studied, usually by a white gaze. Often the public does not take the stance of what Tiffany Ana Lopez calls “critical witnessing,” but rather performs the role of the willfully ignorant, assuming that people in prison deserve to be there, that there is no alternative model, that the law is just, etc. When one critically witnesses, they allow the personal to intersect with the analytical, and in fact, someone who critically witnesses does not believe the analytical can be separated from the personal. This is an important turn from the dominant western epistemology of the statistic, the empirical study. And this, precisely is why I advocate for a humanities/arts education in prisons (until there are no more prisons).

Since Fall 2011, I have been working with RCJ inmates, facilitating poetry workshops. I bring in VCU students to learn alongside inmates in a gender studies/creative writing course. We meet in a crowded room in RCJ called sanctuary. Workshops have expanded over time to include a Spanish-English language exchange and, with the addition of Andrew McGraw, music lessons, audio engineering tutorials, and group music-making. We’ve built a recording

studio inside the jail out of reclaimed audio equipment — as far as we know, the only such studio inside a US jail or prison.

What follows is a journal entry I wrote shortly after beginning work in the RCJ:

*sanctuary is more than a room inside of the Richmond City Jail, lined with books and old computers, walls plastered with portraits of social movement leaders, maps, and art. It is a state of mind, a movement. sanctuary existed long before we were invited to create this workshop. It has been built over years—many voices and bodies have occupied that space. Art has been made. Learning pursued. Lives transformed. Community sustained. We are stepping into sanctuary mid-stream. We are mindful of that fact. sanctuary goes beyond the academic theory of “safer spaces” in an untenable situation. However, the beauty, persistence, and soul-fire are awe-inspiring in this space. sanctuary is about becoming vulnerable, opening up, and contributing to its movement, a society that will no longer need prisons/jails, a new community without walls. This is why we work.*

*This art is a gift. The visual art and sound you will experience here is but a sample of what happens in sanctuary. There is no way to truly describe or fully replicate what happens in sanctuary. We share what we can across borders that are seldom crossed. This sharing is not for your voyeuristic pleasure, but in the hope that you may see or feel something, be moved, get involved.*

In Fall of 2012, we (members of the workshop, both incarcerated and “free”) began an ambitious project. We began to construct a codex of writing and visual art from the workshops in the jail. We also planned to do a CD of recordings. Funded with a QUEST grant from VCU, the codex is becoming a reality this Fall. This codex is based on the *Codex Espangliensis*, a work by Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Felicia Rice, and Enrique Chagoya, which takes the Mayan codices and remixes them with colonial images, writing, and images of resistance. Our codex, simply called *sanctuary*, attempts to do something similar, blending digital printing, letter press, and screen printing, art and writing. The multimedia codex project, comprises a handmade art book, a web site, and sound recordings. We are co-creating an accordion-fold book, 25 feet long when unfolded, containing poetry, prose, and visual art made by all the workshop participants. We are printing this book with the help of local printers Studio Two Three ([studiotwothree.com](http://studiotwothree.com)) and Bowe House Press ([bowehousepress.com](http://bowehousepress.com)). We are producing at least 50 copies. One will be on display at VCU, and one will remain at RCJ. An online version, hosted at [sanctuarysound.org](http://sanctuarysound.org), will incorporate sound recordings produced in the RCJ studio. Our codex examines the history of mass incarceration from inside perspectives, teasing out complexities of identity and community among all contributors.

In Fall 2013, we also started writing manifest@s, as a way to describe our process while inside. Writing the manifest@s is a way for us to write together and attempt to articulate what is happening in the workshop.

This is one manifest@ about the recordings:

*You can read our words as you wish to, but you might miss the purpose, the animation, the revolution in our voices. Our recordings invite you into our emotions, into the intimacy of sanctuary, where every word carries a piece of our souls. Sound communicates expression that words on a page can not. It allows us to emphasize meaning, to infuse layers of music and mood, to collaborate and create a memory that will live in a different kind of permanence.*

*The choice to create recordings empowers us to reach out through dimensions previously untouched. Hear the feeling toning through our voices. Embrace the rhythms of our hopes, loves, and struggles. we are throwing out our hearts to you. We are creating, giving, and sharing, so that you can relate. Does it strike a chord? Or does it strike your soul?*

### **Why sound? (Silence as Punishment)**

We were very passionate about bringing a recording studio into RCJ and were lucky to do so. Silence, as part of a disciplinary regime, is still very much a part of prison life today, most horrifyingly played out in isolation cells, or “the hole.” Like other city jails, the Richmond City Jail encourages silence to all its prisoners as a way to maintain uniformity in an environment where thousands of

citizens of different nationalities, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, races, genders, and sexual orientations inhabit the same cell block. Silence has become a punitive regime inside prisons and jails, it takes on new (and not so new) meaning. Of course, today, with the problem of a growing prison population and overcrowding jails, sanctuary at RCJ has become, for some prisoners, a room to escape from the multisensory chaos that they cannot control inside the jail and enter a small zone where they have some sense of place and community. We see this zone as a temporary autonomous zone, as it has no cameras and no guards.

Drawing from an interview with members of Matmos, a group of sound artists, who claim that “all sound is queer” (*The Wire*, Issue 333, November 2011) and theorists like Josh Kun and Gayatri Gopinath, it could be argued that the sound recordings and the performances inside sanctuary create “queer audiotopias” (drawing from Kun’s and Gopinath’s work). Queer audiotopias refers to Gayatri Gopinath’s extension of Josh Kun’s concept of audiotopia. Kun’s concept draws from the idea that music has the ability to point to the possible, to draw together disparate and heterogeneous ideas, locations, sensations in order to create “sonic spaces of effective urban longings where several sites normally deemed incompatible are brought together, not only in the space of a particular piece of music itself, but in the production of social space and the mapping of geographical space that music makes possible as well” (Kun 289). Gopinath extends this notion of audiotopia to her analysis of a public performance in Central Park, where Abida Parveen’s performance allowed audience members to

create a “queer sonic landscape” in Central Park that, though fleeting, provided a “community of sound,” a space of “queer public culture” (59). Inside a space like the jail, this “community of sound” is often fleeting and momentary, coming together only for the duration of a performance.

If we listen carefully, the sounds produced by the collective at the RCJ from their sanctuary build on the disciplinary history of such place to produce sonic traces that suggest different ways of thinking about the importance of creative spaces in the life of prisoners. This is not to say that the prisoners do not have means of doing similar things without access to sanctuary; they do. sanctuary works as a “contact zone” where prisoners, guards, academics, musicians, writers and students connect and reconnect to enact ordinary actions to break or at the very least remix the disciplinary silence that makes the “general stillness” about the growing problem of the prison industrial complex “more profound.”

### **Scholarship, or Knowledge Otherwise**

We begin to see that the imaginary border between academic scholarship and the work that is generated behind prison walls is knowledge by another name. It’s from this small but significant clearing around the discourse of academic knowledge-making that we position the sonic, visual and written scholarship generated by the collective at the RCJ. We must also question the “acceptable” forms of knowledge production, if we hope to truly cross the border from academia into community. While workshop participants, incarcerated and non-incarcerated alike, are fully capable of producing jargon-laden academic

articles, we choose to produce art, words, and sounds. While journals are full of people studying incarcerated populations or instructive essays about prison writing programs, we feel the work in sanctuary approaches the intersection of sound studies, collaborative knowledge and ethical social practice with a similar critical tone, and the projects we take on highlight that fact.

In addition to the codex and sound recordings, we also produce zines. Zines production draws on the anarchistic models of Deleuze, Hardt, and Negri, but centers on a popular form of cultural resistance in the 1990's, temporary autonomy. Outlined in a manifesto entitled *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (or *T.A.Z.*) by Hakim Bey, and widely distributed in zine format throughout the early 1990's, the concept that one could create a temporary autonomous zone through performance and print media was (and remains) a radical concept.

The role of print media to create a temporary autonomy is crucial to understand, especially in the context of jails and prisons. Zines are often created out of scraps of other publications, using "cut and paste" aesthetic. Most zines are photocopied and printed on cheap materials and distributed by hand or through the mail. Therefore, zines are viewed as serious artistic forms, yet temporary due to their composition and dissemination. When a person goes to the hole at RCJ, a lot of times, guards throw away their possessions. Having writing in this cheap and easily reproduceable format makes it possible to continually flood the jail with publications. This ability to reproduce and regenerate follows the anarchistic model of the rhizome.

There are some challenges in doing this work. Our communication with the prisoners can be terminated at will by jail administrators. We still are committed to people making the art that speaks to them, in their own voice. One complication of this commitment is in relation to the access issues noted above: prisoners are usually not encouraged to speak certain truths about their lives, and may even be punished for speaking. Even in the sanctioned space of the workshop, there is still a hesitancy. We take this very seriously. This is one reason why the codex is collaborative and anonymous. The other reason is that the codex says something when the pieces are put together that any one piece cannot say on its own.

Still this conversation is a bit theoretical and I avoid the raw emotion that comes from doing these workshops. I don't know if I will be able to show that by the time this dissertation goes to the library. I will share a bit of what I learned, however. Getting into jails and prisons is relatively easy if you are doing an "education" program. Part of the carceral logic is rehabilitation and most prison wardens see themselves as the good guys. Being able to get in and stay in is the utmost priority. Also, doing things that on the surface bring good press to the jail/prison helps. You cannot show your radical self when talking to prison officials. Our program has been so successful partially due to my ability to be a chameleon and to produce products that say different things to different people. For example, there is a recording called "Why I write" which does the double talk of explaining the horror of prison life in highly coded ways. Being able to fly under the radar guarantees continued access.



The QUEST grant also is going to pay for a space on the outside. Situated on Broad Street's "Art Walk" this space will be a recording studio and art-making space. Slated to open in January 2015, this space will be a space where people can go once released to get their GEDs, attend a yoga class, lead a writing workshop, record their work, etc. This space, simply called "sanctuary," is the most obvious theory into practice part of the project: we are showing that we can teach each other, that we can heal from the horrors of the PIC, the art that emerges from this project is important and needs to be heard and seen. We have been doing workshops at another local gallery while we wait for our space to be ready and it is amazing to see the community that has gathered there.

We do all of our work from an abolitionist perspective. Abolition is a decolonial process. It starts with delinking what we've been trained to think about prisons, law, and justice. It starts with confronting and delinking our internalized "-isms." The roots of abolition are in the first cry of resistance of indigenous people on this continent, the strategic escape of slaves from slave ships, those sounds resonate in our bodies. Abolition requires we think of a world without prisons. Where we build communities that take care of ourselves, where we divest, continually divest from white supremacy and capitalism. Abolition requires that we continually dismantle the false wall between us and them, where we consider ourselves to speak and act for and with one another.

## **Afterword**

At the beginning of this project, I was concerned with two interrelated questions: how to bring together academic knowledge, artistic production, and activism and how to forge a movement that does not reproduce oppression. These concepts are difficult for me to articulate, as I do not easily separate theorizing from doing. bell hooks famously said, following Paulo Freire, that theory IS practice (hooks, 60-75). She says, “When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two--that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other” (61). In the sanctuary workshops, and the music and zines these workshops produce, we are continually involved in this process of self-recovery and collectivism. The art that comes from this experience is both expressive/creative and theoretical, as one influences the other to the point where they may be indistinguishable from one another.

For example, one of the projects that sanctuary produced was a piece for a website that some scholars from Duke University put together (<http://soundboxproject.com/beta/>). Our piece, entitled “We are Your Neighbors,” features sounds and writing from our workshop. Not only do the pieces included

in this site have aesthetic value, they cause the person who encounters the site to question what we mean when we say “neighbor” and how that term might be uncomfortable for some when they realize that “our neighbors” are incarcerated. What happens in that marginal space between object (sound) and interpretation (emotion) is both theoretical (how to bring the violence of prison home, literally, and how to create humans out of numbers) AND practical (the art is made inside a prison).

The second question, the question of how to build a movement without replicating oppressive structures, can be more difficult to practice, because the practice of this calls for continual self and community-based reflection, something our (western) culture doesn’t easily accommodate because it takes time and that time may not always be evidently “productive.” For example, our culture doesn’t often allow for reflective time of journaling or casual conversations, and doesn’t often see these types of activities as essential community-building activities. I’ve made arguments throughout this book about resisting assimilation, engaging in decolonial practice, re-envisioning both physical space (borders) and psychic space (margins), but in a culture where marriage is seen as a portal to civil rights (and, indeed, it is structured so), what IS assimilation can be quite complicated. For example, my friend is an undocumented queer man. He recently married his best friend, a man who is a U.S. citizen. This enables him to file paperwork for U.S. citizenship. Is this assimilation? The incredible structural violence done to undocumented people in this country with detainment, incarceration, deportation, and separation from family and loved ones makes this

marriage perhaps an act of revolution under current circumstances. As long as marriage is tied to civil issues like citizenship, these dilemmas will remain.

The concept of radical futurity is increasingly important as well. The current mode of judging “success” or “productivity” marginalizes queer voices from the outset, as concepts like “success” denote linear time and follow dominant markers for this success. We must re-imagine time in order to be free. Utopia does not exist in a far-away time or place, utopia is in the present, the act of continual building. To situate utopia as unreachable fulfills a capitalist and colonial fantasy; the continual conquest in hope of reaching this someday place. Art and activism that subvert this colonial fantasy opens up a way to seeing utopia.

Who deserves a viable life? I return to Judith Butler’s question because I think the importance of this question lies in its ability to be both moral and philosophical, intellectual and emotional, theoretical and intensely practical. Deleuze could only imagine a missing people, but Anzaldua calls these missing people home. To truly see the *homines sacrii*, the people who are missing, we must listen to scholars, theorists, activists and artists who belong to these groups, the people that Southerners on New Ground put at the forefront of their liberation movement, the people that academics often paraphrase, but never cite. From Lizzie Borden’s screenplay, Isabel’s final soliloquy discusses the future unfolding in the present as the “revolution” unfolds, and is a good place as any to end for now:

This fight will not end in terrorism and violence. It will not end in a nuclear holocaust. It begins in a celebration of the rights of alchemy, the transformation of shit into gold, the illumination of dark chaotic night into light. This is the time of sweet, sweet change for us all.

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