



**BUILDING AN ABOLITIONIST  
TRANS AND QUEER MOVEMENT  
WITH EVERYTHING WE'VE GOT**

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# BUILDING AN ABOLITIONIST TRANS AND QUEER MOVEMENT WITH EVERYTHING WE'VE GOT

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As we write this, queer and trans people across the United States and in many parts of the world have just celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion. On that fateful night back in June 1969, sexual and gender outsiders rose up against ongoing brutal police violence in an inspiring act of defiance. These early freedom fighters knew all too well that the NYPD—"New York's finest"—were the frontline threat to queer and trans survival. Stonewall was the culmination of years of domination, resentment, and upheaval in many marginalized communities coming to a new consciousness of the depth of violence committed by the government against poor people, people of color, women, and queer people both within US borders and around the world. The Stonewall Rebellion, the mass demonstrations against the war in Vietnam, and the campaign to

21. Academy of Achievement: A Museum of Living History, "Rosa Parks," October, 31, 2005 at <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/par0bio-1>.
22. CNNMoney.com, "Oprah Car Winners Hit with Hefty Tax," September, 22, 2004 at [http://money.cnn.com/2004/09/22/news/newsmakers/oprah\\_car\\_tax/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2004/09/22/news/newsmakers/oprah_car_tax/index.htm).
23. We recognize that we mention only relatively well-funded organizations and mostly organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area and New York City, two strongholds of radical organizing and also places where a significant amount of resources are concentrated. There are hundreds of other organizations around the country and the world that we do not mention and do not know about. *What organizations or spaces do you see embodying radical values?*
24. The Sylvia Rivera Law Project at <http://www.srlp.org>.
25. Queers for Economic Justice at <http://www.q4ej.org>.
26. Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex Justice Project at <http://www.tgjip.org>.
27. Critical Resistance at <http://www.criticalresistance.org>.
28. FIERCE! at <http://www.fierceny.org>.
29. Southerners on New Ground at <http://www.southernersonnewground.org>.
30. See Creative Interventions at <http://www.creative-interventions.org>, generationFIVE at <http://www.generationfive.org>, Communities Against Rape and Abuse at <http://www.cara-seattle.org>, and Audre Lorde Project's Safe OUTside the System Collective at <http://www.alp.org>.
31. For examples of LGBTQ-specific organizations creating community-based responses to violence, see the Audre Lorde Project's Safe Outside the System Collective in Brooklyn ([www.alp.org](http://www.alp.org)), the Northwest Network of BTLG Survivors of Abuse in Seattle, and Community United Against Violence (CUAV) in San Francisco ([www.cuav.org](http://www.cuav.org)).
32. Particularly significant was the Transforming Justice gathering in San Francisco in October 2007, which brought together over two hundred LGBTQ and allied formerly imprisoned people, activists, and attorneys to develop a shared analysis about the cycles of trans poverty, criminalization, and imprisonment and a shared strategy moving forward. Transforming Justice, which has now transitioned to a national coalition, was a culmination of tireless and often invisible work on the part of imprisoned and formerly imprisoned people and their allies over the past many years. For more, see [www.transformingjustice.org](http://www.transformingjustice.org).
33. See the Transforming Justice Coalition's statement "How We Do Our Work" for a more detailed account of day-to-day organizing ethics, which can be requested from the TGI Justice Project at <http://www.tgjip.org>.
34. Both of the lessons here were significantly and powerfully articulated and popularized by Critical Resistance and Justice Now, both primarily based in Oakland, CA.

11. Human Rights Watch, "NAFTA Labor Accord Ineffective," April 15, 2001, at <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2001/04/16/global179.htm>. Corporations specifically named in complaints by workers include General Electric, Honeywell, Sony, General Motors, McDonald's, Sprint, and the Washington State apple industry.
12. Sapphire, "A Homeless Man's Alternative to 'Care Not Cash,'" *Poor Magazine*, July 1, 2003, at <http://www.poormagazine.org/index.cfm?L1=news&category=50&stor=1241>.
13. The Sentencing Project, "Life Sentences: Denying Welfare Benefit to Women Convicted of Drug Offenses," at [http://www.sentencingproject.org/Admin/Documents/publications/women\\_smy\\_lifesentences.pdf](http://www.sentencingproject.org/Admin/Documents/publications/women_smy_lifesentences.pdf).
14. Alan David Freeman, "Legitimizing Racial Discrimination Through Antidiscrimination Law: A Critical Review of Supreme Court Doctrine," 62 MINN. L. REV. 1049, 1052 (1978).
15. Visit generationFIVE at <http://www.generationfive.org> and Stop It Now! at <http://www.stopitnow.org> online for more research documenting and tools for ending child sexual abuse.
16. For a critique of hate crimes legislation, see Carolina Cordero Dyer, "The Passage of Hate Crimes Legislation—No Cause to Celebrate," INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, March 2001 at [http://www.incite-national.org/news/\\_march01/editorial.html](http://www.incite-national.org/news/_march01/editorial.html). Also see INCITE!—Denver and Denver on Fire's response to the verdict in the 2009 Angie Zapata case at <http://www.leftturn.org/?q=node/1310>.
17. For an in-depth analysis of the growth and impacts of "nonprofit industrial complex," see INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence's groundbreaking anthology *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, published by South End Press in 2007.
18. For a deeper examination of the FBI's attack on radical movements, see Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall's *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret War Against Domestic Dissent*, published by South End Press in 1990. Also see the Freedom Archive's 2006 documentary *Legacy of Torture: The War Against the Black Liberation Movement* about the important case of the San Francisco 8. Information available online at <http://www.freedomarchives.org/BPP/torture.html>.
19. See Justice Now co-founder Cassandra Shaylor's essay "Neither Kind Nor Gender: The Perils of 'Gender Responsive Justice'" in *The Violence of Incarceration*, edited by Phil Scraton and Jude McCulloch, published by Routledge in 2008.
20. Academy of Achievement: A Museum of Living History, "Rosa Parks," October, 25, 2005 at <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/par0pro-1>.

free imprisoned Black-liberation activist Assata Shakur were all powerful examples of a groundswell of energy demanding an end to the "business as usual" of US terror during this time.

Could these groundbreaking and often unsung activists have imagined that only forty years later the "official" gay rights agenda would be largely pro-police, pro-prisons, and pro-war—exactly the forces they worked so hard to resist? Just a few decades later, the most visible and well-funded arms of the "LGBT movement" look much more like a corporate strategizing session than a grassroots social justice movement. There are countless examples of this dramatic shift in priorities. What emerged as a fight against racist, anti-poor, and anti-queer police violence now works hand in hand with local and federal law enforcement agencies—district attorneys are asked to speak at trans rallies, cops march in Gay Pride parades. The agendas of prosecutors—those who lock up our family, friends, and lovers—and many queer and trans organizations are becoming increasingly similar, with sentence- and police-enhancing legislation at the top of the priority list. Hate crimes legislation is tacked on to multi-billion dollar "defense" bills to support US military domination in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Despite the rhetoric of an "LGBT community," transgender and gender-non-conforming people are repeatedly abandoned and marginalized in the agendas and priorities of our "lead" organizations—most recently in the 2007 gutting of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act of gender identity protections. And as the rate of people (particularly poor queer and trans people of color) without steady jobs, housing, or healthcare continues to rise, and health and social services continue to be cut, those dubbed the leaders of the "LGBT movement" insist that marriage rights are the way to redress the inequalities in our communities.

For more and more queer and trans people, regardless of marital status, there is no inheritance, no health benefits from employers, no legal immigration status, and no state protection of our relationship to our children. Four decades after queer and trans people took to the streets throwing heels, bottles, bricks, and anything else we had to ward off police, the official word is that, except for being able to get married and fight in the military,<sup>2</sup> we are pretty much free, safe, and equal. And those of us who are not must wait our turn until the "priority" battles are won by the largely white, male, upper-class lawyers and lobbyists who know better than us.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, radical queer and trans organizing for deep transformation has also grown alongside this "trickle-down"<sup>4</sup> brand of "equality"

politics mentioned above. Although there is no neat line between official gay “equality” politics on the one hand, and radical “justice” politics on the other, it is important to draw out some of the key distinctions in how different parts of our movements today are responding to the main problems that queer and trans people face. This is less about creating false dichotomies between “good” and “bad” approaches, and more about clarifying the actual impact that various strategies have, and recognizing that alternative approaches to the “official” solutions are alive, are politically viable, and are being pursued by activists and organizations around the United States and beyond. In the first column, we identify some of these main challenges; in the second, we summarize what solutions are being offered by the well-resourced<sup>5</sup> segments of our movement; and in the third, we outline some approaches being used by more radical and progressive queer and trans organizing to expand possibilities for broad-based, social-justice solutions to these same problems.

**The Current Landscape**

BIG PROBLEMS	“OFFICIAL” SOLUTIONS	TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES
Queer and trans people, poor people, people of color, and immigrants have minimal access to quality healthcare	Legalize same-sex marriage to allow people with health benefits from their jobs to share with same-sex partners	Strengthen Medicaid and Medicare; win universal healthcare; fight for transgender health benefits; end deadly medical neglect of people in state custody
Queer and trans people experience regular and often fatal violence from partners, family members, community members, employers, law enforcement, and institutional officials	Pass hate crimes legislation to increase prison sentences and strengthen local and federal law enforcement; collect statistics on rates of violence; collaborate with local and federal law enforcement to prosecute hate violence and domestic violence	Build community relationships and infrastructure to support the healing and transformation of people who have been impacted by interpersonal and intergenerational violence; join with movements addressing root causes of queer and trans premature death, including police violence, imprisonment, poverty, immigration policies, and lack of healthcare and housing

- same-sex marriage ban, Proposition 8, declared that marriage equality needed to be the central funding priority and discontinued vital funding for anti-violence, HIV/AIDS, and arts organizations, among others.
4. This is a reference to the “trickle-down” economic policies associated with the Reagan Administration, which promoted tax cuts for the rich under the guise of creating jobs for middle-class and working-class people. The left has rightfully argued that justice, wealth, and safety do not “trickle down,” but need to be redistributed first to the people at the bottom of the economic and political ladder. Trickle down policies primarily operate as another opportunity to distribute wealth and security upward.
  5. By this we mean the advocacy work and agenda-setting done by wealthy (budgets over \$1 million) LGBT-rights organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign and the National Lesbian and Gay Task Force.
  6. See the Sylvia Rivera Law Project’s *It’s War in Here: A Report on the Treatment of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People in New York State Prisons* (available online at [www.srlp.org](http://www.srlp.org)) and *Gendered Punishment: Strategies to Protect Transgender, Gender Variant and Intersex People in America’s Prisons* (available from TGI Justice Project, [info@tgijp.org](mailto:info@tgijp.org)) for a deeper examination of the cycles of poverty, criminalization, imprisonment, and law-enforcement violence in transgender and gender-non-conforming communities.
  7. This was a period of heightened activity by radical and revolutionary national and international movements resisting white supremacy, patriarchy, colonization, and capitalism—embodied by organizations such as the American Indian Movement, the Black Liberation Army, the Young Lords, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the Brown Berets, Earth First!, the Gay Liberation Front, and the Weather Underground in the United States, and anti-colonial organizations in Guinea-Bissau, Jamaica, Vietnam, Puerto Rico, Zimbabwe, and elsewhere. Mass movements throughout the world succeeded in winning major victories against imperialism and white supremacy, and exposing the genocide that lay barely underneath American narratives of democracy, exceptionalism, and liberty.
  8. See Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Globalisation and US Prison Growth: From Military Keynesianism to Post-Keynesian Militarism,” *Race and Class*, Vol. 40, No. 2-3, 1998/99.
  9. For a compelling analysis of neoliberalism and its impacts on social movements, see Lisa Duggan’s *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, published by Beacon Press in 2004.
  10. Public Citizen, *NAFTA and Workers’ Rights and Jobs*, 2008, at <http://www.citizen.org/trade/nafta/jobs>.

education, meaningful and secure employment, loving and healing relationships, and being our full and whole selves, we are doing abolition. Abolition is about breaking down things that oppress and building up things that nourish. Abolition is the practice of transformation in the here and now and the ever after.

Maybe wrestling with such a significant demand is the wake-up call that an increasingly sleepy LGBT movement needs. The true potential of queer and trans politics cannot be found in attempting to reinforce our tenuous right to exist by undermining someone else's. If it is not clear already, we are all in this together. To claim our legacy of beautiful impossibility is to begin practicing ways of being with one another and making movement that sustain all life on this planet, without exception. It is to begin speaking what we have not yet had the words to wish for.

**NOTES**

1. We would like to thank the friends, comrades, and organizations whose work, love, and thinking have paved the path to this paper and our collective movements for liberation, including: Anna Agathangelou, Audre Lorde Project, Community United Against Violence (CUAV), Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA), Critical Resistance, Eric Stanley, FIERCE!, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Justice Now, Lala Yantes, Mari Spira, Miss Major, Mordecai Cohen Ettinger, Nat Smith, Southerners on New Ground (SONG), Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), Transforming Justice Coalition, Transgender, Gender Variant, Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP), and Vanessa Huang.
2. In the wake of the 2011 repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell, queer and trans people who oppose the horrible violence committed by the US military all over the world have been disappointed not only by pro-military rhetoric of the campaign to allow gays and lesbians to serve, but also by the new debates that have emerged since then about ROTC on college campuses. Many universities that have excluded the military from campuses are now considering bringing it back to campus, and some activists are arguing that the military should be kept off campus because trans people are still excluded from service. The terms of this debate painfully embraces US militarism, and forgets that long-term campaigns to exclude the US military from college campuses and to disrupt military recruitment campaigns and strategies are based in not only the horrible violence of the military toward service members but also the motivating colonial and imperial purposes of US militarism.
3. This has been painfully illustrated by a range of LGBT foundation and individual funders who, in the months leading up to the struggle over California's

**Captive Genders**

BIG PROBLEMS	"OFFICIAL" SOLUTIONS	TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES
Queer and trans members of the military experience violence and discrimination	Eliminate bans on participation of gays and lesbians in US military	Join with war resisters, radical veterans, and young people to oppose military intervention, occupation, and war abroad and at home, and demand the reduction/elimination of "defense" budgets
Queer and trans people are targeted by an unfair and punitive immigration system	Legalize same-sex marriage to allow same-sex international couples to apply for legal residency for the non-US citizen spouse	End the use of immigration policy to criminalize people of color, exploit workers, and maintain the deadly wealth gap between the United States and the Global South; support current detainees and end ICE raids, deportations, and police collaboration
Queer and trans families are vulnerable to legal intervention and separation from the state, institutions, and/or non-queer people	Legalize same sex marriage to provide a route to "legalize" families with two parents of the same sex; pass laws banning adoption discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation	Join with struggles of queer/trans and non-queer/trans families of color, imprisoned parents and youth, native families, poor families, military families, and people with disabilities to win community and family self-determination and the right to keep kids, parents, and other family members in their families and communities
Institutions fail to recognize family connections outside of heterosexual marriage in contexts like hospital visitation and inheritance	Legalize same-sex marriage to formally recognize same-sex partners in the eyes of the law	Change policies like hospital visitation to recognize a variety of family structures, not just opposite-sex and same-sex couples; abolish inheritance and demand radical redistribution of wealth and an end to poverty

BIG PROBLEMS	"OFFICIAL" SOLUTIONS	TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES
Queer and trans people are disproportionately policed, arrested, and imprisoned, and face high rates of violence in state custody from officials as well as other imprisoned or detained people	Advocate for "cultural competency" training for law enforcement and the construction of queer and trans-specific and "gender-responsive" facilities; create written policies that say that queer and trans people are equal to other people in state custody; stay largely silent on the high rates of imprisonment in queer and trans communities, communities of color, and poor communities	Build ongoing, accountable relationships with and advocate for queer and trans people who are locked up to support their daily well-being, healing, leadership, and survival; build community networks of care to support people coming out of prison and jail; collaborate with other movements to address root causes of queer and trans imprisonment; work to abolish prisons, establish community support for people with disabilities and eliminate medical and psychiatric institutionalization, and provide permanent housing rather than shelter beds for all people without homes

### I. How Did We Get Here?

The streams of conservative as well as more progressive and radical queer and trans politics developed over time and in the context of a rapidly changing political, economic, and social landscape. Although we can't offer a full history of how these different streams developed and how the more conservative one gained national dominance, we think it is important to trace the historical context in which these shifts occurred. *To chart a different course for our movements, we need to understand the road we've traveled.* In particular, we believe that there are two major features of the second half of the twentieth century that shaped the context in which the queer and trans movement developed: (1) the active resistance and challenge by radical movement to state violence, and subsequent systematic backlash,<sup>7</sup> and (2) the massive turmoil and transformation of the global economy.<sup>8</sup> Activists and scholars use a range of terms to describe this era in which power, wealth, and oppression were transformed to respond to these two significant "crises"—including neoliberalism, the "New World Order," empire, globalization, free market democracy, or late capitalism.

*against trans imprisonment is one of many key places to radicalize queer and trans politics, expand anti-prison politics, and join in a larger movement for racial, economic, gender, and social justice to end all forms of militarization, criminalization, and warfare.*

### III. So You Think We're Impossible?

This stuff is heavy, we realize. Our communities and our movements are up against tremendous odds and have inherited a great deal of trauma that we are still struggling to deal with. A common and reasonable response to these conditions is getting overwhelmed, feeling defeated, losing hope. In this kind of emotional and political climate, when activists call for deep change like prison abolition (or, gasp, an LGBT agenda *centered around* prison abolition), our demands get called "impossible" or "idealistic" or even "divisive." As trans people, we've been hearing this for ages. After all, according to our legal system, the media, science, and many of our families and religions, we shouldn't exist! Our ways of living and expressing ourselves break such fundamental rules that systems crash at our feet, close their doors to us, and attempt to wipe us out. And yet we exist, continuing to build and sustain new ways of looking at gender, bodies, family, desire, resistance, and happiness that nourish us and challenge expectations.

In an age when thousands of people are murdered annually in the name of "democracy," millions of people are locked up to "protect public safety," and LGBT organizations march hand in hand with cops in Pride parades, being impossible may just be the best thing we've got going for ourselves: *Impossibility may very well be our only possibility.*

What would it mean to *embrace*, rather than *shy away from*, the impossibility of our ways of living as well as our political visions? What would it mean to desire a future that we can't even imagine but that we are told couldn't ever exist? We see the abolition of policing, prisons, jails, and detention not strictly as a narrow answer to "imprisonment" and the abuses that occur within prisons, but also as a challenge to the rule of poverty, violence, racism, alienation, and disconnection that we face every day. Abolition is not just about closing the doors to violent institutions, but also about building up and recovering institutions and practices and relationships that nurture wholeness, self-determination, and transformation. Abolition is not some distant future but something we create in every moment when we say no to the traps of empire and yes to the nourishing possibilities dreamed of and practiced by our ancestors and friends. Every time we insist on accessible and affirming healthcare, safe and quality

that much of the “public education” work around these issues often relies on sexualization, voyeurism, sensationalism, and fetishization to get its point across. In general there is a focus on graphic descriptions of people’s bodies (specifically their genitals), sexual violence, and the humiliation they have faced. Imprisoned people (who are usually represented as black) and transgender people (who are usually represented as transgender women of color in this context) have long been the target of voyeuristic representation—from porn movies that glorify rape in prison to fetishizing “human rights” research distributed to majority white, middle-class audiences. As transgender people who often have our bodies on display for non-transgender people who feel empowered to question, display, and discuss us, we know that this is a dangerous trend that seriously undercuts the integrity of our work and the types of relationships that can be formed. Unless we address these exploitative power dynamics in our work, even our most “well-intentioned” strategies and movements will reproduce the prison industrial complex’s norms of transphobic, misogynist, and racist sexualized violence. *Research, media, cultural work, and activism on this issue needs to be accountable to and directed by low-income transgender people and transgender people of color and our organizations.*

#### 4. We see ending trans imprisonment as part of the larger struggle for transformation.

The violence that transgender people—significantly low-income transgender people of color—face in prisons, jails, and detention centers and the cycles of poverty and criminalization that leads so many of us to imprisonment is a key place to work for broad-based social and political transformation. There is no way that transgender people can ever be “safe” in prisons as long as prisons exist and, as scholar Fred Moten has written, as long as we live in a society that could even *have* prisons. Building a trans and queer abolitionist movement means building power among people facing multiple systems of oppression in order to imagine a world beyond mass devastation, violence, and inequity that occurs within and between communities. We must resist the trap of being compartmentalized into “issues” and “priorities” and sacrificing a broader political vision and movement to react to the crisis of the here and now. This is the logic that allows many white and middle-class gay and lesbian folks to think that marriage is *the* most important and pressing LGBT issue, without being invested in the real goal of ending racism and capitalism. *Struggling*

Each term describes a different aspect or “take” on the current historical moment that we are living in.

It is important to be clear that *none of the strategies of the “New World Order” are new*. They might work faster, use new technologies, and recruit the help of new groups, but they are not new. Oppressive dynamics in the United States are as old as the colonization of this land and the founding of a country based on slavery and genocide. However, they have taken intensified, tricky forms in the past few decades—particularly because our governments keep telling us those institutions and practices have been “abolished.” There were no “good old days” in the United States—just times in which our movements and our communities were stronger or weaker, and times when we used different cracks in the system as opportunities for resistance. All in all, we might characterize the past many decades as a time in which policies and ideas were promoted by powerful nations and institutions (such as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund) to destroy the minimal safety nets set up for vulnerable people, dismantle the gains made by social movements, and redistribute wealth, resources, and life changes upward—away from the poor and toward the elite.<sup>9</sup>

Below are some of the key tactics that the United States and others have used in this most recent chapter of our history:

#### • Pull Yourself Up by Your Bootstraps, Again

The US government and its ally nations and institutions in the Global North helped pass laws and policies that made it harder for workers to organize into unions; destroyed welfare programs and created the image of people on welfare as immoral and fraudulent; and created international economic policies and trade agreements that reduced safety nets, worker rights, and environmental protections, particularly for nations in the Global South. Together, these efforts have dismantled laws and social programs meant to protect people from poverty, violence, sickness, and other harms of capitalism.

**EXAMPLE:** In the early 1990s, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was implemented by the United States under Democratic President Clinton to make it easier for corporations to do business across borders between the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Unfortunately, by allowing corporations to outsource their labor much more cheaply, the agreement also led to the loss