

no more potlucks

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EDITORIAL

Le thème: la rage.

Colère violente, explosive. Une intensité furieuse, comparable à celle d'une tempête ou d'une maladie. Violent, explosive anger. A fit of anger. Furious intensity.

The link between rage and anger is one that came up in almost every submission to NMP — the issue for which the theme was most closely contemplated. NMP wraps up its second year — can you believe it? — with this excellent assortment of rage-filled, rage-induced, rage-inspired, contributions to art and analysis. The good kind of rage. The productive kind of rage.

Yasmin Nair never ceases to amaze me with her ability to make sense of things. Important things. When your politics are true to your heart — as they so obviously are for Nair — rage becomes the lube that untangles the threads of power. Plucking identity from ideology, Nair troubles the perceptions of Dan Choi as martyr and militant.

Rage can also be a burning desire; a passion. Un désir brûlant ; une passion.

RM Vaughn chats with Andrew Harwood about the role of rage as a creative force. Together they wisely tease out the part played by anger, repression, alienation, fear, regret, and sadness in art — always as a

means of understanding the world and the people in it.

Interdisciplinary artist, Dana Claxton, corresponds with NMP's Dayna McLeod about her recent projects, her inspirations, and the importance of weaving rage with grace in art-making processes that draw from and deal with oppression and conceptions of justice. Claxton provides NMP with photography, video, and insights into her performative work.

Rage: to spread or prevail forcefully. To move with great violence or intensity.

Traveling through Israel and Palestine to visit friends, Chelsey Lichtman documents her detour on a Birth-right Israel tour. With that tour, Lichtman became one of 200,000 Jewish young adults to cash in on a free trip to Israel sponsored by the Israeli government and philanthropists... the intention of which is subverted and detailed in a series of email exchanges with friends and family.

NMP's M-C MacPhee gets personal with singer-songwriter Mary Gauthier. An inspiring interview.

Zaheen K. interviews the director of the film "red lips [cages for black girls]", kyisha williams, where they discuss first experiences in filmmaking, scaling down and letting go.

Regular NMP contributor, Elisha Lim continues with the fabulous 'Illustrated Gentlemen' series. Lim's 2011 Wall Calendar by the same name is currently on sale at www.etsy.com/shop/elishalim. Look for Lim's book '100 Butches' to be published next year.

Illustrator and founder of micro-publishing B&D Press, Eloisa Aquino, presents a stunning story on the life of Chavela Vargas. Look forward to another one of Aquino's incredible zines in 2011.

A regular contributor to NMP, Nicholas Little, presents another incredibly succinct and potent piece on sex work as perceived by the Canadian media since the important ruling by Judge Himel that saw three major Criminal Code provisions whipped into submission. We look forward to tracking the progress of this decision in 2011.

Finally, in this issue I had the privilege of co-interviewing someone I admire and whose power resonates well beyond the pages of this journal. Jenn Clamen has been working with us at NMP for over a year, but it is perhaps in this issue that we see the full grandeur of her contributions. She discusses, with co-contributor M-C MacPhee and me, the impact of the recent ruling by Himel.

Happy birthday to M-C: my best friend of life and the fast-typing fingers of NMP. I hope to keep burning the midnight oil with you forever.

Thank you to S. Ingraham for the donation to NMP, and to Elana Wright, Jane Schulman and Arlene Zimmerman for pledging to Dykes on Mykes in order to support CKUT 90.3 FM, community radio, in and out of Montreal. I should mention that NMP also donated money to CKUT's Dykes on Mykes and that

you should, too. (We got Ani Difranco's latest album 'Canon' for it, too. So there.) Pledge online now - it takes five seconds.

You can also donate money to NMP - more than 30\$ gets you a free subscription and a mention on the thank-you page.

Thank you to Dayna McLeod and our regular contributors for keeping up the amazing quality of NMP. Big warm welcome to Yasmin Nair - our newest regular contributor! As always, huge thank-you to copy editors for this issue: Renuka Chaturvedi, Jenn Clamen, Tamara Shepherd, and Lindsay Shane.

Merci, sincèrement, à nos contributrices et nos contributeurs de 2009 et 2010. If you've missed out on some of the action — not to worry — you can buy your print copies directly from the publishers online.

Special thank you to Momoko Allard for the endless hours of formatting the journals for print. Issue 11 is HUGE and it's out now.

In two months, NMP embarks on a 3rd year of showcasing amazing talent and brains. With issue 13 launching in January 2011, we're preempting all superstitions with the theme of "chance". Stay tuned.

Until then: see you all at the Meow Mix, December 4, at Sala Rosa (Montreal!). Great show in the works. We'll also give away 4 print issues of the NMP journals...

As always, do comment on the articles — contributors are thankful for this. Dear readers, we are still and always committed to bringing forward a riotous and rebellious magazine bimonthly.

Mél Hogan

“SAFETY, NOT MORALITY”: AN INTERVIEW WITH JENN CLAMEN

Jenn Clamen | Mél Hogan & M-C MacPhee

On September 28, the Ontario Superior Court struck down three federal prostitution laws as unconstitutional. This ruling removes some of the criminal sanction from an occupation that is not in itself illegal in Canada, but that is heavily criminalized.

Justice Susan Himel ruled in favour of three sex-trade workers who argued that laws prohibiting them from communicating for the purpose of prostitution (solicitation), running a bawdy house, and living off the avails of prostitution put the lives of sex workers at risk.

We asked Jenn Clamen to talk to us about the impact and implications of these laws. Clamen has been working with NMP for over a year now as an editor and consultant for all sex-worker related submissions to the journal. Working with Stella for years, Clamen is a staunch activist for human rights. She is also a dear friend of ours.

NMP: Can you explain the implications that these laws (210, 212, 213) have on the lives and the work conditions of sex workers in Canada?

Jenn Clamen: First, it's important to situate and name the impact of criminalization. As many other criminalized communities understand, being targeted by the law means you are not guaranteed protection of the law without discrimination. This often makes you a target of hate crimes, as we have seen in the increasing instances of violence against sex workers. Prostitution laws function in the same way; they limit sex workers' options in seeking safety and protection, as they are constantly avoiding legal persecution.

Section 210, commonly known as the “bawdy house” law, prevents sex workers from working indoors or using an indoor site more than once for the purposes of prostitution. Without a permitted workspace, sex workers are relegated to hotels, other peoples' homes, and the street—none of which offer the protection of knowing your own workspace, the exits, or the phone, for example. It also prevents sex workers from using their own homes or familiar work environments as workspaces.

Section 212 is known as the “pimping”, or procuring law. It prevents individuals from living on the avails of their earnings, as a prostitute. This section prevents

sex workers from hiring or working with third parties like receptionists, managers, drivers, and other workers—all of whom can provide protection. It criminalizes sex workers' personal and working relationships.

Finally, Section 213 is the communicating law, which prevents sex workers from communicating in public for the purposes of prostitution. This is the law that is applied with the most vigour, and the most disproportionately, against the most marginalized and visible sex workers; typically Aboriginal street workers. It also prevents all workers from negotiating and talking with clients about their work in public. Imagine having to negotiate a contract with a client but not being able to discuss what that contract looks like? The prohibition of all of these activities means that sex workers are constantly dodging police—which often means they are out of sight and at more risk.

NMP: Judge Himel ruled that the laws 210, 212 & 213 infringed on and violated Section 1 and 7 of the Charter and are therefore unconstitutional. What are the implications of citing these sections of the Charter in this ruling?

Clamen: The Charter states that every citizen of Canada is entitled to certain rights and freedoms. If a law infringes on those freedoms, the government must be able to justify this. These Charter sections were used to test the limits of prostitution laws and whether they did or did not infringe on sex workers' Charter rights.

Section 1 of the Charter “guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in the Charter subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.” Himel acknowledged in her ruling, “that the danger faced by prostitutes greatly outweighs any harm which may be faced by the public”. She acknowledged not only the danger of prostitution law on sex workers' lives, but emphasized and weighed this harm with

public harm. In this sense, sex workers' safety is seen to outweigh any danger that prostitution may have on the public. Justice Himel said something to this extent as well.

Section 7 of the Charter guarantees the right to “life, liberty and security of the person”. Judge Himel stated that “[Prostitution] laws, individually and together, force prostitutes to choose between their liberty interest and their right to security of the person as protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.” She acknowledged that sex workers have the right to security and liberty, and that the laws, and the enforcement that comes with them, infringe on those rights.

Barbara Kay's coverage of the trial in the National Post included hate slurring that “we should not have respect for these people,” known as sex workers, and that Himel's decision is “like putting lipstick on a pig.” For her ilk and for a society that has barely acknowledged sex workers as human beings, the recognition of these Charter rights is invaluable.

NMP: What is Himel's ruling going to change for sex workers in Ontario? In what ways will their work and their lives be made safer and what risks will they still face?

Clamen: Just to be clear, Himel did not strike down the laws in their entirety: she only struck down the laws that were being challenged, which left quite a few standing that still maintain the risk and impact of criminalization.

Section 211, transporting to a bawdy house, was not struck down so we have yet to see what the implications of this is, though people rarely get charged under this law. Section 212(1)(j), living on the avails, and Section 213(1)(c), communicating for the purposes of prostitution, were struck down—but other provisions in 212 around procuring and coercion and in 213 around blocking circulation of traffic, for example, still

remain (for a full reading see your friendly Criminal Code). This may mean that if the ruling sticks, it will be much safer for sex workers to work indoors, but that sex workers who are not indoors may still be prosecuted, depending on the strategies for law enforcement. It's a huge victory; however, there is still a lot of work to do to protect and fulfil the rights of the most marginalized sex workers who remain at great risk of police repression and violence.

The ruling itself is inspiring for sex workers and our communities on many levels. The ruling is recognition of the violence that sex workers experience as a result of the barriers that these laws pose to access and protection. Sex workers' safety, in relation to prostitution law, was acknowledged as primordial. This is unprecedented. More specifically, many sex workers in Ontario will now have access to safer working conditions. Sex worker activists who have been bringing the message of the need for safer working conditions, and an end to the violence against sex workers, have finally received recognition—which goes a long way and has definitely shifted the battleground, if only slightly. It's historical.

We do expect there to be federal, provincial and municipal backlash, which may imply that municipalities will swoop in with a form of regulation. But we will continue to press that this regulation needs to be shaped by sex workers, who live with and have experienced stigma and discrimination, and as a result can name the priorities for safety in the sex industry.

NMP: The sex workers' rights movement has spent many years of struggling for this kind of recognition and repeatedly having it denied; why do you think this groundbreaking ruling happened now?

Clamen: It takes an entire community to put these messages forward—and the sex worker rights movement has been struggling tirelessly for over three decades to try and stop the violence in our communi-

ties. Even though sex work has become fashionable, sex workers are labeled “happy hookers” by people missing the mark around our message of safety, and much of the anti-prostitution movement has glorified prostitution in doing so, it has not stopped us from being clear about the impacts of prostitution law. It's only so long before communities start to recognize that the images they have of prostitution are constructed—they are not “Pretty Woman”, or “crack-hos” or even “Belle de Jours.” The media and anti-prostitution movements that glorify our message have refused to give way or to see the actual realities of sex workers that have been made invisible. Why now? Because there are more sex workers who are willing to risk their lives, their work, and their freedom by being visible to show that sex workers are diverse, that sex workers are in danger, that we need to stop making laws founded in moral crusades. This could not have happened without the years of work that people put into this. And part of this work has been educating judges, shifting discourse, and educating the masses about sex workers' realities. Besides, we were damn due!

NMP: While this recent charter challenge was of course part of an ongoing struggle for sex workers rights, the ruling seemed—in some ways—to come out of nowhere. Did it seem like an isolated effort?

Clamen: I can't count the number of times that the words “crap shoot” have come out of my mouth in the past few weeks. Sometimes you just get lucky that you find yourself in front of a feminist, clear-minded, responsible, accountable, and like-minded judge—rarely though. In New Zealand they happened to have a transsexual sex worker as an MP when prostitution was decriminalized. While on the one hand, Judge Himel and her ruling came out of nowhere, on the other, sex workers and activists have been struggling for years and putting out the same clear and tangible message: prostitution laws contribute to the physical, verbal, and mental harm that sex workers experience.

It took one person to recognize this officially, but it took an entire movement to shift people and communities, lawyers and witnesses, and community organizations into an understanding of this.

NMP: What does this ruling mean for the sex workers' rights movement across the country? Could you explain the recent approval to challenge criminal laws against prostitution in BC? Are we going to see these kinds of challenges happening across Canada?

Clamen: As if life after September 28th could get any more exciting, one week later the congratulatory rose I gave my girlfriend was still bright, intact and standing strong, as if expecting this next victory and recognition for sex workers. The BC courts that had previously denied the application for a group of sex workers known as SWUAV (Sex Workers United Against Violence) and a sex worker named Sheri Kiselbach to challenge the constitutionality of prostitution laws, overturned their decision. Katrina Pacey, a lawyer from PIVOT Legal Society, along with Joe Arvay, presented their case to challenge most of the prostitution laws in 2008. Their case was denied—the judge ruled that the plaintiffs didn't have standing, meaning, he didn't feel that a group of sex workers was affected by the laws (as opposed to the individuals of the group), and didn't feel that Sheri, who had worked 30 years in the industry both on the street and indoors, was currently affected since she was no longer working (its important to add that Sheri testified that she would be working if it weren't for the dangers that prostitution law created along with the evident lack of police protection for sex workers in Vancouver). But PIVOT won the appeal, which means that their case will most likely make it to court (barring an appeal on the appeal, argh). The case that PIVOT has put together makes different arguments than the Ontario case, and challenges more of the prostitution laws, which is important, since issues across Canada vary greatly, across culture and region. The sex workers who

are taking these cases forward have risked their lives and work, which is one of the reasons that SWUAV went forward as a group—to protect anonymity. That the courts finally recognized why this is important is huge, and that they recognized that someone who has worked for 30 years in the industry can testify to the violence and danger of prostitution law is important. Other challenges across Canada? Who knows? These cases are hard to mount—they take a lot of person power, a lot of goodwill on behalf of lawyers and people willing to testify, and above all, they require the bravery and self-sacrifice of sex workers willing to take the cases forward.

NMP: What are some of the reactions to the rulings? Who has been most vocal and what kinds of arguments are being presented?

Clamen: The typical antis have reared their heads, and swiftly, after the ruling was announced on September 28th. To name a few, many abolitionist organizations across Canada—and particularly the Conseil statut de la femme—sent out a press release denouncing the ruling. What is particularly annoying about this position is that many abolitionists and so-called feminist groups are positioning themselves as the “feminist position”—which obviously renders invisible many sex workers and activists in the sex worker rights movement who are fundamentally feminist. Their arguments have done little to advance the discussion around the safety for sex workers; they have reverted to old theoretical discourses of prostitution itself as the oldest form of violence, while completely ignoring the actual lived violence that sex workers experience. The arguments they are presenting are not factual arguments, but moral rhetoric that is so far removed from any reality that sex workers experience in life and work. Most importantly, they don't address how striking down the laws could be more dangerous for sex workers. Aside from the expected backlash of anti-prostitution zealots, there has been an interesting mix of public opinion responses—a lot of which sup-

ports the safety of sex workers regardless of whether they support the idea and reality of sex work itself. The ruling has definitely shifted popular discourse, or at least allowed the question to be based in an understanding of safety, rather than morality. There has always been support for the decriminalization (misunderstood and conflated with legalization) of prostitution, but it has been couched within a moral debate and as a result has not recognized the safety of sex workers. Public opinion remains the same, but when it is framed within a safety argument, obviously lends more support to the ruling. The trick here is keeping the discussion on the real issue for sex workers: safety, not morality.

NMP: Can you explain the original and extended 30-day stay of Himel’s decision and what this means practically for the current state of the laws cited above (in Ontario)?

Clamen: To start, sex workers in Ontario still technically face the same dangers they did before the ruling, since there is now a 60-day stay on the ruling (extended from the original 30 days), and within that time, the Federal government can appeal, which they have already announced they will do. This means that Justice Himel struck down the laws cited above, but her decision will not be active until 60 days after the ruling itself. So sex workers may not see a day of a new legislative regime—between the duration of the stay of the ruling and the appeal, the ruling may not actually take effect. When the appeal actually begins, the laws remain in their original state until the end of the case. It may mean that jurisdictions in Ontario will engage differently with prostitution law until the case is closed, but based on recent reports of raids in Toronto brothels, this does not look like it will be the case.

NMP: Can you outline briefly Harper’s announcement to appeal the ruling?

Clamen: Harper, as expected, did not take the decision lying down (ahem). He, too, was quick to announce that he would contest the decision. Within the last year he has been burning the midnight oil to reconstruct crime prevention in our country and develop a more ‘tough on crime’ approach. In August, he announced his change to the definition of “Organized Crime”, which includes brothel-keeping and a sentence of up to 5 years. That brothel-keeping charges were increased was highly disconcerting. Many MPs could not fight him on this because: 1) he presented it and it was passed as an Order-in-Council (i.e. through the backdoor); and 2) because he was framing it within ‘crime prevention’, so any argument against that would not likely win in the polls. All of this is to say that his response was not a surprise. And essentially, his Crown is busy writing their appeal.

NMP: Decriminalization and legalization are very different scenarios—can you explain each of them and discuss what you think is an ideal situation for sex workers in Canada? Can this scenario extend to all sex workers?

Clamen: Prostitution has never been illegal, but everything that a sex worker has to do to keep safe and work with freedom, is. On the most general and defining level, decriminalization means a repeal of all Criminal laws that sanction prostitution. Legalization implies that the state determines the where, when and how of prostitution, which typically means that the most marginalized sex work, and those who experience the greatest intersections of oppressive environments, are even further criminalized.

For example: in countries where prostitution is legalized and licenses are required by law to run a prostitution business, sex workers with criminal records, those on the street, and those generally of a lower socio-economic background who cannot afford the licenses, are criminalized. The stigmatic assumptions that drive prostitution law do not disappear with

the removal of the laws; so the assumptions that sex workers on the street are using drugs, are not able to hold down a job, and are vectors of disease, continue to drive policy around prostitution.

Decriminalization—the removal of prostitution laws from the Criminal Code—is a first step. The next step is for sex workers in provinces and municipalities across the country to define the terms of what decriminalization looks like, which is inevitably a form of regulation. However, that regulation needs to be shaped and adapted to the realities for sex workers, which means it takes the impact of continued criminalization, stigmatization and discrimination into account when designing a new legislative regime.

For example: if sex workers are not used to receiving paychecks and paystubs and paying taxes in a way where they can claim their actual job, time needs to be allotted for sex workers to adapt to this “mainstream” regime. Another example is if sex workers are not used to being able to talk about their work and have hidden their work out of imposed shame, stigma, and discrimination, a regime needs to account for the shock of transforming from that. I believe that our society, in general, takes stigma and discrimination for granted in terms of their impact on an individual’s life. For sex workers to wake up one morning and expect to work within a decriminalized system with no hassles, and to know the legal framework for permitted businesses, is unrealistic—there needs to be education and capacity and skill building. The industry will look different depending on where you work; dancer needs are different from massage workers’ needs, are different from street workers’ needs, are different from escorts’ needs...

NMP: So is the umbrella term “sex work” useful as a united front, or does it risk not adequately answering to anyone’s needs?

Clamen: This is a really great question. The term “sex work” was created by a long-time sex worker and ac-

tivist Carol Leigh, aka Scarlot Harlot, in the United States in 1970s as a way of uniting sex workers for a common cause: workers’ rights (sex work as work), decriminalization of that work, and anti-violence. For the purposes of a movement, the term is very useful—we just have to be really cognizant of the fact that there are a gazillion differences between sectors and individuals within sectors. So it does unite sex workers when necessary, but also means that people will repel the term because they don’t feel recognized—which usually means that people within the movement are compelled (at least should be) to push a discourse and discussion around inclusion and representation and learn more about how to do both better. It’s not that different from the term “feminism”—as we know, over the years, there has been an onslaught of backlash and solidarity within feminist movements as we try to unite, create space for, and adequately encourage independence of different feminists. We are lucky within the sex worker rights movement that our communities are so strong and have so much vitality, that when people and issues are not represented under this umbrella, you can bet your arse that you’ll hear about them, and fast—which gives us reason to respond and become more accountable.

Ideally, the ruling in Ontario will trickle down to all provinces in Canada. If it doesn’t, then sex worker activists in other provinces will surely fight until that’s the case.

NMP: Can you talk a bit about your role as an activist—what your activism looks like and what you hope to personally and/or collectively achieve? In keeping with the theme of the issue, can you talk about the place of “rage” in your activism?

Clamen: My immediate reaction to the decision was shock. That shock lasted a while, until a deep rage and sadness (which to me are completely interlinked) unveiled themselves. Some of my mentors and colleagues reacted the same way, and it became clear

that even though this decision is a historical move, a huge step in a direction that most of us didn't think we would see in our lifetimes, this decision didn't heal the pain of being made invisible for years, or recognize the struggle that we still have to fight to ensure sex workers' rights are fulfilled, protected and respected. Nor did it grant the right to access police protection or health care without discrimination, or allow sex workers to freely cross borders, or bring back the hundreds of sex workers who have been murdered at work. As someone who has been engaged in the fight for decriminalization for 10 years, and been mentored for years by people who have fought for 10+ years longer than I have, I believe we will keep fighting until we can undo all of the damage that has been done from years of the stigma, discrimination and harm that criminalization and societal expectations have had—which should take some time. But it is my sincere belief that we should be working to make ourselves redundant, in the sense that sex workers will one day be able to have the same access and protection granted to and expected by other groups in society. Our movement is guided by principles of solidarity, human and labour rights, and non-violence—most of this is laden with anger, frustration, pain and the constant disappointment and lived consequences of invisibility. I believe right now our communities are experiencing a range of emotions—all that comes as a result of social change. Social change is scary; it vibrates in our community with its own life force and has given us the space to celebrate, while at the same time holding our years of anger and pain with the world's response to prostitution. It's these same emotions that will drive us to continue the uphill battle for sex workers' recognition.

NMP: The Conservative Government has rushed to appeal this ruling and its reasons for doing so do not seem grounded in the rationale of Himel's decision—in what ways do you think issues are being conflated by opposition and in the media?

Clamen: The difference between this court decision and parliamentary decisions around prostitution is that Himel based her ruling in safety and the impact of the laws. Both took into account sex workers' perspectives, though neither saw sex workers' testimonies as the expert witnesses. Contrary to this, parliamentary discussions of prostitution, though couched in the language of safety, are about morality and public opinion: if safety was at the core, they would take seriously the testimonies from people who are doing sex work that say they feel unsafe because of the laws. But I digress. Justice Himel makes an interesting point in her ruling on p26: she makes the distinction between an "expert" of the court and an advocate—the former being someone who is presenting evidence and the latter someone who is preaching and advocating on behalf of an opinion. Many of the abolitionists that she cites to be advocating are part of an opposition to decriminalization, who are preaching their values rather than looking at the actual harms of prostitution law, as Justice Himel did and as sex workers have been doing for over 30 years. The media has been a mixed bag—the day of the ruling saw more coverage of dancing and celebrating sex workers than we had ever seen. The context changed: we could cite Himel pointing to the dangers of prostitution laws, we could use the precedent that she set for us. The days to follow, of course, were the typical backlash, and the media has been engaging in typical "debates" around prostitution—the majority of people have yet to recognize that debating women's realities often neglects the actual realities of the women, and focuses instead on the lives and morals of the people engaged in that debate.

NMP: The NDP's Jack Layton said in Xtra that "Violence against women is a moral issue, so that's going to have to be discussed as a part of this." Do you have any thoughts on this quote and on the fact that this ruling—despite being made on the grounds of safety—continues to be discussed in relation to morality?[1]

Clamen: I think the idea that violence is a moral issue is rooted in the oldest of misogynist attitudes—violence against women is a human rights issue. Claiming anything to be a moral issue is claiming that there is a discussion to be had—that there is a “side” to pick, that there is an opinion other than one that recognizes violence is abuse. But I won’t get pedantic, I understand him as saying that we need to address the morality of prostitution—and if you believe that laws should be based within morality, knowing that morality is guided predominantly by a paternalistic and racist (I can go on) discourse, then sure, lets chat morality! But it’s important to be clear that we would be talking about Jack Layton’s morality, not about sex workers’ morality.

This is not the first time that parliament has taken a close look at prostitution or prostitution law. The last attempt was in 2003, initiated by Libby Davies with a private members’ bill (she is the NDP representative, her constituency is the Downtown East Side Riding of Vancouver). She proposed that parliament look at prostitution law to see how it could be made safer for prostitutes—of course the discussion, in the end, was based on morality and rarely begged the question of how to improve safety. The reason a court challenge is so effective is because it attempts to answer the question that is asked (while it is not totally free of morality discussions). Justice Himel looks at the impact of the laws and the degree of harm that they cause for sex workers—something we can only wish Parliament would take up. It is important to keep in mind that other parties are following in the Conservatives’ footsteps, planning to “get tough on crime.” Bal-

ance that against the fact that 3 out of 4 of the major political parties in Canada voted in favour of decriminalization of prostitution in the 2006 Parliamentary Committee SSLR Subcommittee Report, and we’ve got a very confused group of law makers.

NMP: How and with what organizations or groups is your activism for sex workers rights concentrated?

I soon after joined Stella and worked there with a fantastic community of vibrant, diverse, and empowered female-identified sex workers. Stella is Montreal’s only funded group run for and by sex workers, with a human rights approach.

Clamen: I began organizing in 2000 with the International Union of Sex Workers. Labour organizing with sex workers is probably some of the most empowering work that we can do for our community, since unions typically bypass issues of morality when it comes to which jobs people choose. The openness to workers’ issues really touched me. In 2002 I joined the Coalition for the Rights of Sex Workers, a Montreal-based group of sex workers and allies. I arrived just in time to join the organizational team for

our first Turn Up the Heat Festival! The Coalition has a history of colourful activity and action for sex workers’ rights. As a grassroots non-funded group, the Coalition has served as a wonderful platform for action and demand.

I soon after joined Stella and worked there with a fantastic community of vibrant, diverse, and empowered female-identified sex workers. Stella is Montreal’s only funded group run for and by sex workers, with a human rights approach. For all of the hooplah from antis around what some believe is a “happy hooker movement”, Stella is home to some of the most profound and colourful actions around violence and re-

spect for sex workers' human and labour rights. In 2003 I co-founded an organization with Kara Gillies called the Canadian Guild for Erotic Labour—it didn't go as far as we had intended, but sent a really important message to labour unions around the importance of solidarity work with sex workers. Hopefully we will be able to pick it up again one day. I continue to be implicated at Stella and within the Network of Sex Work Projects, which is a global network and movement for sex work projects in North America and the Caribbean, Eastern and Central Europe, Asia Pacific, Latin America, and Africa.

NMP: How do you keep informed on these issues? How important to your activism is access to information and/or personal experience?

Clamen: It is really important that sex workers around the globe are in contact with one another—that has obviously become easier as activism has gone viral. This has some perks and some problems as well, but generally, it ensures that our sisters in Thailand know when something is going on in Montreal, and that we can learn and share skills and information with our communities in Australia, in Nigeria, in Kyrgyzstan, in Bangladesh, in Cambodia, for example. Different listservs and conferences help us keep in touch. Our movement is strong, and extremely diverse. Most of the tools and actions around the world are inspired by each other, so we ensure regular contact with groups outside of Quebec and Canada.

NMP: What about the International Sex Workers Rights movement—is the political activity happening in Quebec, Ontario and the rest of Canada part of an international movement? Where do these movements collide and how do they differ?

Clamen: The call for decriminalization, safer working conditions, an end to violence, and respect for sex workers that is not limited to sex workers in Quebec—in fact, some of our older community members and groups around the world have helped to educate us and inform us in our activism. When sex work was decriminalized in New Zealand in 2003, it gave sex workers around the world hope. When sex workers in Brazil worked with their government to combat discriminatory US HIV policy, it inspired sex workers

around the world. When a sex worker in South Africa was able to gain labour recognition and compensation through the courts for being fired, it was a victory internationally for sex workers. Our actions across the world join us together. Of course we have different issues—sex workers in Eastern Europe who live and work in a non-regulated regime may deal with more police corruption and severe violence from police, sex workers in Sweden may experience more violence and police harassment be-

Queer movements and sex worker rights movements both understand the realities of protectionist and moralistic policies that aim to suppress and repress a diversity of sexual identities and sexual practices.

cause of the laws that criminalize their clients, and sex workers of colour in the US may suffer an entirely different level of police repression and oppression, but these are issues that are not unique to sex workers in one area of the world. When we fight for freedom in Quebec, we are fighting for freedom for sex workers across the world.

NMP: Sex work activism seems to have been brought into the realm of queer politics in recent years. What are some of the consequences (positive, negative or both) of this association, perceived or real?

Clamen: Movement building and coalition building are really important to any social movement. The sex worker rights movement is very well supported by the AIDS movement, the queer movement, and other movements with intersecting issues. The relationship between the queer movement and the sex worker rights movement has been created on many principles, one being the principle of sexuality, sexual minorities, and bodily autonomy—there are many similarities between sex work and queer identities in this sense. This has been positive in the sense that many sex workers, who identify as a sex worker, and experience sex work as a subversive identity, feel very supported. The connections don't stop there. Queer movements and sex worker rights movements both understand the realities of protectionist and moralistic policies that aim to suppress and repress a diversity of sexual identities and sexual practices. Yet one of the challenges of this marriage of movements, if you will, is that many people who do sex work relate to it as work rather than as an identity. They may not relate to challenges for diverse sexual identities. Also, while sex work has become thought of as “subversive” by some, for others it may not be subversive at all, and while the act of sex work is subversive in a legal sense, a sex workers' personal life may work to promote and uphold the patriarchal norms that we find in many heteronormative relationships. So some elements of these movements collide, while others do not. Some sex workers prefer to ally with the labour movement, where their sexuality may not be respected, but their labour as a worker is recognized. Others feel comfortable allying with AIDS movements who understand the criminalization of an identity, but not necessarily in that their work is criminalized. The issues are complex and interrelated with many movements and there are many points of solidarity. The challenges

for activism lie in the challenges I have pointed out here—depending on how deeply these intersections and points of difference are negotiated and explored will depend on how successful people will be at learning and adapting to the diversity of messages and realities we have in the sex worker rights movement.

NMP: You are involved in the struggle for sex workers' rights as an activist and on an academic level. What benefits do you see from bringing these issues into the academy? Do you find contradictions in doing so?

Clamen: One of the challenges of teaching around sex workers' rights is that there is a misconception that sex workers' realities are up for debate. In this sense, the realities of all sex workers are important—those who have experienced exploitation, those who have experienced discrimination, and those who live with the stigma of being a sex workers. While there is a diversity of experience to know, no sex worker is immune to stigma and discrimination. As a teacher, you are meant to leave room for the development of discussion and differing opinions. And people have a lot of opinions on sex work, particularly people who have never or never plan to do it! As an activist, I strongly believe that sex workers' lives are not up for debate: if one woman alone has died because of the danger that current paternalistic prostitution laws have created, then that is one too many, and the only important thing is this lived experience and safety, regardless of whether one “agrees” with prostitution or not. Again, we need to recognize that there is no actual “debate” around prostitution—sex workers are fighting to end the real violence they experience. Anti-prostitution movements are working to end the violence they see as prostitution (read: if prostitution exists, and prostitution is violence, then we need to get rid of prostitution). Thus they are further repressing a community of sex workers based on a correlation they assume to exist but cannot support; they don't put their energies into stopping the actual violence that is happening, they simply spew rhetoric. And unfortunately, in the

academy, much of the discussion is rhetoric, where I believe it should be a place to make visible realities and knowledges that people within academies would not typically be exposed to.

Abolitionists have not elaborated on how it would be more dangerous to remove prostitution laws—they cannot explain how less police repression would be detrimental to sex workers. Most of these debates happen in a vacuum: We can theorize around the relationship between pornography and violence, but there is actual violence that sex workers are experiencing! If sex workers are testifying that prostitution laws are what are preventing them from reporting violence to police, that the stigma around sex work prevents people from talking about their work, and that the harm caused to sex workers is a result of the moral panic around prostitution, then there is no reason why people should be debating about how they feel about prostitution, without some serious reflection about who their influences are. In this sense prostitution should not be a debate amongst students who are not doing prostitution! Why is it that we allow academic spaces where realities are debated? Why would students' and academics' perspectives on

prostitution trump prostitutes' actual experience? The academy doesn't necessarily leave room for experiential knowledge as expertise. But I believe some universities are changing to privilege reality over theoretical pontification.

References

[1] http://www.xtra.ca/public/National/Conservatives_will_appeal_Ontario_sex...

Jenn Clamen has been active in the Canadian and global sex worker rights movements since 2000. She began her work with the International Union of Sex Workers in London (UK) and in 2003, with Kara Gillies, founded the Canadian Guild for Erotic Labour. Clamen worked as a Mobilization and Communications Coordinator at Stella, and is an active member of the Coalition for the Rights of Sex Workers. In 2005 she co-coordinated Stella's Forum XXX: A gathering of over 250 sex workers and allies from around the world. She is currently a board member of Montreal's group for and by sex workers, Stella, and a North American representative on the Board of Directors of the Global Network for Sex Work Projects.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BUTCH DYKES: CHAVELA VARGAS

Eloisa Aquino

Eloisa Aquino came to Montreal from São Paulo (Brazil) to do an MA at Concordia University, but that was ten years ago – she must've forgotten to go back. She's been making zines forever but never before had so much fun making them. You can check her micro-publishing gig at B&D Press.

From the Series *The Life And Times of Butch Dykes*

CHAVELA VARGAS



CHAVELA VARGAS HAD
LIVED ALL 70 YEARS OF
HER LIFE INTENSELY.

BUT THERE SHE WAS, IN
THE EARLY 90s, FORGOTTEN.





SHE LOVED GUNS FROM
THE TIME SHE WAS A
CHILD. "GUNS MADE ME
COMPANY." CHAVE LA
WAS LONELY AND
UNLOVED, SO SHE WAS
STILL A TEENAGER
WHEN SHE DECIDED TO
LEAVE COSTA RICA AND
GO TO MEXICO. TO SING.

SHE ALSO LOVED WOMEN.
AND DRINKING. "I DRANK
45 THOUSAND LITRES OF
TEQUILA."  
STILL YOUNG AND NOT FAMOUS,
CHAVE LA LIVED WITH FRIDA
+ DIEGO RIVERA. KAHLO.

THERE WERE YEARS OF ODD JOBS,
ADVENTURES, AND AMATEUR
SINGING. IT'S LIKELY THAT
CHAVELA BECAME CHAVELA
IN THOSE YEARS, BEFORE
HER FIRST RECORDING,
AT 30. SHE INVENTED
THE SINGER IN PANTS

AND SHORT HAIR WHO
SANG ROMANTIC RANCHERAS
TO WOMEN. SHE AMAZED PEOPLE.



SHE WENT TO CUBA WITH THE POET
NICOLA'S GUILLEN ON TOUR.

"I WENT TO CUBA FOR TWO
WEEKS

AND STAYED
TWO YEARS."

THE SONG

MACORINA WAS DISCOVERED

AND REINVENTED BY CHAVELA
IN HER STAY IN CUBA.

NOW ONE LISTENS TO
THE DRAMATIC LYRICS WITHOUT
KNOWING IF THE "HERE"
WHERE MACORINA PUTS HER
HAND IS A RIFLE, A GUITAR,
A BULLET WOUND OR SOME
PART OF THE FEMALE ANATOMY.



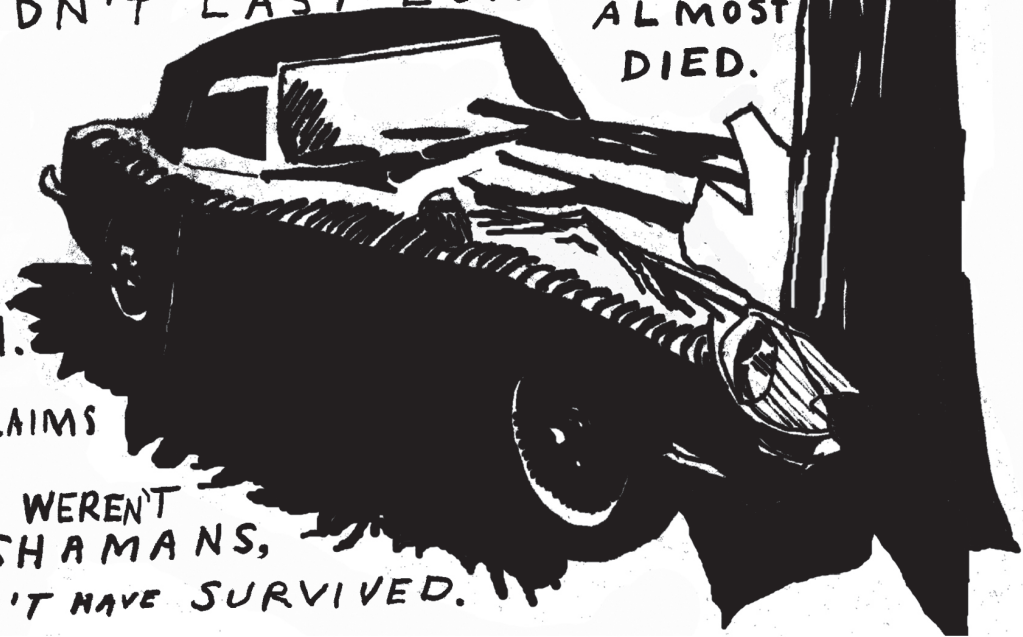
FIRST PUBLIC WOMAN IN MEXICO
TO WEAR PANTS. FIRST TO
DECLARE NOT TO LIKE MEN.

FIRST TO OWN A JAGUAR E TYPE
THAT DIDN'T LAST LONG. SHE
ALMOST
DIED.

TWICE
BEFORE
SHE WAS
NEAR DEATH.

CHAVELA CLAIMS

THAT IF IT WERENT
FOR THE SHAMANS,
SHE WOULDN'T HAVE SURVIVED.



"SOMETIMES

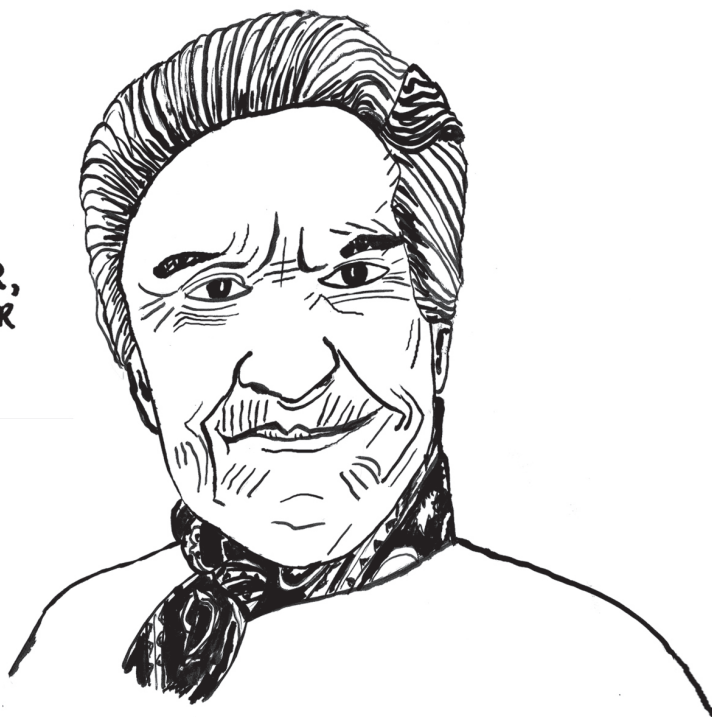
IT IS MORE BEAUTIFUL

REMINISCING
THAN LIVING."



THE WOMAN WHO
WAS ONCE CHASED
OUT OF A SMALL TOWN
FOR WEARING PANTS
CAME OUT OF THE
CLOSET AT THE
AGE OF 81.

SHE WAS ALSO
EXPERIENCING A STRONG
RESSURGENCE AS A SINGER,
HAVING APPEARED IN ONE ALMODOVAR
FILM.



IN HER TRIUMPHANT
RETURN, IN SEVILLA,

"THANK YOU, FRIENDS.
THANKS FOR STILL
BEING HERE.

BECAUSE ... WHAT
LOVER WOULD
WAIT TWENTY YEARS?"

CHAVELA LIVES BETWEEN MEXICO,
SPAIN AND COSTA RICA, AND HAS
RETIRED FROM SINGING. SHE'S 92.



THE BIRTHWRONG DIARIES

Chelsey Lichtman

In December 2008 I embarked on a two-month trip to Israel and Palestine. For the first ten days I was a participant on a Birthright Israel tour. Birthright is a program that started in Canada in the late 1990's and with the help of the Israel government and philanthropists, has since provided over 200,000 Jewish kids between the ages of 18-26 with free trips to Israel. I decided to use the free ticket as a way to visit my friends Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky who were making a film in Ramallah for the year. To this day I am still unsure if what I experienced on Birthright was worth the free ticket. Three days before I arrived Israel began its bombardment on Gaza, which resulted in the deaths of over fifteen hundred Palestinians. This here is my account.

*From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: tripod
Date: Dec 21 '08
To: elle -----*

Hey Elle,
So birthwrong- The itinerary as far as I know is: Jerusalem the first two days so the 31st and 1st and then Tel Aviv the 2nd and 3rd. then we're off into who the hell knows where-Tiberias, Eilat, hell, etc. It would be SO AMAZING if you and Tamira were able to meet up in any of those places. But the security is nutty. Like they don't even let JEWS near us probs. But at night if I 'stay in my room...' I'm sure I could sneak out or something. There is also a birthright 'mega event'- I feel like a nar even writing this stuff. It's such fucking loser bullshit. But anyway the night of the 1st in Jerusalem I will be at a huge event thing and maybe I can sneak off for a bit. I have no fears.
Chelsey



From: Richard ---
Subject: re: Situation in Gaza
Date:
To: Birthright Group 1122

** note: this is an email from one of the Canadian Birthright organizers to the group of Canadian kids preparing to go to Israel in December 2009

Hi Everyone,

I was on the phone with Momo, the head of our tour provider, earlier today and we spoke regarding the current situation in Gaza. I know that many of you are probably concerned and wondering if this will affect our trip. Momo has assured me that the situation is not going to affect us and that the media portrayals of this situation are not completely accurate. I can tell you from personal experience that Hamas has been firing missiles into Israel from Gaza ever since Israel withdrew from the territory. This has been pretty much a daily occurrence. The Israeli government has been warning Hamas for a long time that if they were unable to stop the missiles, Israel would do the job for them and that is what has just happened.

Regardless of this situation, Birthright groups have never gone anywhere near Gaza or within range of the missiles that are fired from Gaza. We also will not enter Judea and Samaria (The West Bank), or East Jerusalem while we are there. The safety and security of Birthright groups is of the highest importance to the tour staff and the Israeli authorities. All Birthright groups are accompanied by an armed guard, who is carrying a GPS equipped satellite phone that keeps the Israeli army informed of our location at all times.

Our group is proceeding as scheduled and it is highly unlikely that any of us will even notice that there is anything going on there other than normal daily activity. If you have any concerns or wish to

talk to myself or Hindy, please don't hesitate to call us, we'd be happy to talk to you. I'm really looking forward to meeting all of you on Tuesday,

Richard

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: New Plan?
Date: December 29th, 2009
To: Elle ---, Tamira ---

Hi Women:

Okay so it seems like the kid I was coming on Birthright with is no longer going...I'm about to barf and kill myself. But anyway this means that I am not going to spend that week after, traveling between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem...I would rather be doing some sort of constructive organizing because the situation in Gaza is obviously escalating and is so fucking disgusting, dreadful, and horrifying. I can stay a week at a time and go between my fam and you guys still.

I just keep reading the news over and over and it's just sickening and beyond measure. Since there is NOTHING happening here in terms of public outrage/outcry, it will feel better to be over there I guess. I am just so scared of Birthright but at this point I am not ruling out telling them to fuck off and defecting.

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: re: urgent action
Date: January 2nd, 2009
To: Jenny

I am here already watching this crazy fucking country carry on as they are killing off the Gazans. Birthright is everything and nothing you can

FREE
PALESTINE

imagine. I am video taping as much of their racist bullshit as I can and am planning something big for later. The homophobia is sickening. Today Samira and another woman from Aswat[I] came to meet me in Tel Aviv and the reactions from my Israeli trip leader and the people on my trip was abhorrent. I don't even know if that makes sense because I am on no sleep. It is their tactic. to bring everyone to a point that they are just hallucinating Zionism. No sleep. Anyway more later.
chelsey

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: greetings from hell.
Date: Friday Jan 2nd, 2009

To: Liz, Alexis, Anna, May, Elle, Jen, Julia, Joan, Reena, Karine, Kaleb, Leah, Emma, Helen, Vivian, Chloe, Tamira, Bec, Hannah, Jenny

Today was intense because Samira and one of her friends from Aswat came to meet me in Tel Aviv during my free hour and when they escorted me back to the bus my prick, fuckhead, piece of shit Israeli tour guide gave them dirty looks and when I finally got on the bus, I overheard him saying to the Canadian tour guide that they are lucky that Israel lets them live here because if they lived in Palestine they'd be dead.

This is ONE example of the disgusting crap that this guy, Uri, my Israeli tour guide has said.

Last night we played 2 truths and a lie and for one of my truths I said that my father was born in Palestine and there was a chorus of aggressive, "what's Palestine(s)?"

The truth is, I am not sure how I will make it through the next few days till this shit is done. I am really not sure. But I am trying to convince myself I am here to expose something ...but we will see.

I do think I have an out, because of the homophobia, and if it did so happen that I couldn't take it and had to defect, and if they tried to take me to court, I could maybe counter threaten with a counter suit of discrimination.
Chelsey

To: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: wow-speechless
Date: Jan 2nd, 2009
From: Reena

here are a list of empowering lezzie (retro) words for ya from me and karen:

womb an
wimmin
womyn
yummy snizzy carpet munchies
pussy power
labial liberation
lesbian avengers
riot grrrrrls
your bubbie wears combat boots
amazon warrior princesses
the labrys
bonobo matriarchs
praying mantis

and non-zionist kick ass jews:

judith butler (i think she's jewish)
emma goldman
hannah arendt
neta golan
naomi binder wall
b.h. yael
ME
:-)



From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: hi
Date: Friday Jan 3rd, 2009
To: Alexis, Karine, Liz, Emma

This morning we were walking and Uri asked me again if Samira and her other friend were out to their families and started talking about honor killings and then I said that my girlfriend who is born and raised in Canada is not out and that many people I know aren't out either and that Samira is Muslim and Palestinian and is out, and that it depends family to family not necessarily country to country and he wouldn't have any of that. Funny thing was that Samira called me in the middle of the conversation and she told me to ask him if he had heard of the Tel Aviv shelter for Jewish queer kids who come out and then have to flee their families. Then we started talking about world pride and he said something like, "you know what-in this case i am against the gays. They should know better than to try and gather in a place like Jerusalem." I was like "uh well maybe world pride couldn't be in a place like Jerusalem because not everyone can access that place." And that he understood.

It was nice to see Samira this morning because she is always so encouraging about me finishing the trip and she knows I am having a hard time (obviously). I keep telling her that it is not such a huge sacrifice, what I'm doing. It feels so fucked up that she is congratulating me for enduring my 'birthright'.

Tomorrow I get to sleep in a tent in the desert with all these little fuckers (literally, they are all fucking each other) and then climbing Masada at like 2am.

I have started a new tactic where I tell people that my grandfather who served in the Irgun (jewish underground) is a staunch anti zionist because of all the bad things he was made to do to Palestinians

when they were massacring all the villages starting before '48. THESE PEOPLE HAVE NO IDEA HOW THIS STATE WAS FOUNDED. I make shit up, literally string together pieces of what I know and remember from books, docs, etc-I don't care how off it is, the foundation of what I'm saying is correct. I had a lengthy conversation with this guy today and really enlightened him. Then at the end he asked me, "so uhh then, do you not believe there is any reason for zion?" ZION! like the laryn hill song!

I am okay with the people on my trip they are nice and are nice to me. but they do want to hear about the way I fuck other women, etc. but I can handle that. It's the fascism coming from the Israeli tour guide that is going to drive me to drink absinthe.

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: re: hi
Date: Jan 4th, 2009
From: Reena

hang in there, girl
 you are in the belly of the beast.
 i am thinking of you.

and tonight,
 when you
 remember the people of gaza
 your prayers will be amplified

just like rachel (i think it was her)
 who prayed silently
 as her lips moved
 and hashem listened
 not because of her volume
 but because of her
 intention.

SUPER-JEW

MO

S
M
L
XL



JERUSALEM

HOLY LAND

T - shirts

100% cotton

**AMERICA
DON'T WORRY**



**SRAEL IS
BEHIND YOU**

4
6
8
10
12
14



JERUSALEM

JERUSALEM



From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: re: An Open Letter From Anti-Zionist Jewish Youth in Canada
Date: Jan 10th, 2009
To: Liz, Alexis, Anna, Reena, Karine, Kaleb, Helen, Bec, Hannah, Christina

I am in Ramallah! Driving in was obviously a real shocker. Well not the city itself but definitely seeing the wall. It's HUGE. And made out of concrete. Not sure what I expecting it to be made of.

There is so much for me to process. So much going on. Its really a trip to go from 10 days of brain-washing to here.

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: hi
Date: Jan 12h, 2009
To: Dad

Hey Dad,
Got your message. Everything is fine except for the fact that Israel is committing a genocide about an hour from where I am staying.

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: rebel grrrr
Date: Jan 13th, 2009
To: ---

The day was very intense. Its like I can't even process the fact that I saw bombs dropping on Gaza and heard them. We didn't get that close but about 5km away.

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: Just one day in Palestine
Date: Jan 15th, 2009
To: Alexis, Anna, Molly, Aviva, Reena, Chloe, Rachel, Kaleb, Karine, Leah, Kelly, Julia, Hannah, Helen, Jen, Jordan, Julie, Liz, Melissa, Emma, Christina

Every day that I am in Palestine I understand the realities of occupation more and more and I am just a very temporary visitor. What I have been witnessing I am afraid that I will not find the words to explain when I come back. I can't really articulate what I have been observing just being here. There is so much I can't even begin to get it all down.

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: something special
Date: Jan 21st, 2009
To: ---

Just had gay movie night in Ramallah!

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: hi
Date: Jan 30th, 2009
To: Mom, Dad, Aunty Shari

Hey Everyone
Just a quick update-I have had my life threatened twice during my time here. Once was by an Israeli soldier who overheard a conversation on the bus I was having about being queer. He said if he wasn't in uniform he would kill me and my friend. The other time was by a settlement security guard who took away our passports and threatened to shoot us if we moved. We had just taken a wrong turn.
Welcome to Israel.



HI PA
HI PA !

WWW.bethlehem

THE
ratio

KREE

DINI
ON
DARJI

2/56
5-10

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: so you know
Date: Feb 3rd, 2009
To: ---

Hi!

I am in the Internet cafe I sometimes use in the Jerusalem bus station and without fail, every time I am here, there are orthodox Jewish girls on facebook screaming about getting married and having babies and its hilarious! and their statuses are always like, Elisheva Bracha Goldberg is so excited that Chana is getting married!

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: Re: Just one day in Palestine
Date: February 4th, 2009
To: Kelly

I had an incredible time here and have learned more than I ever would have expected. I am just really scared that I am going to become a self hating Jew because of what I have seen done to the Palestinian people in the name of a Jewish state. I haven't felt like this since I was 14. That I really am not sure why I would have a connection to Judaism even though I have developed such a positive anti Zionist Jewish community in Toronto. I am just not sure anymore. So we'll see what happens when I get home and process, process, process!

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: Re: Just one day in Palestine
Date: February 10th, 2009
To: Kelly

Had some trouble re settling and was feeling pretty down and depressed and not knowing how to deal with or process with my trip. I am so out of

money and desperate to find work but at the same time feeling so lazy and just want to lie around all day and hang out with friends

From: Chelsey Lichtman
Subject: Sigi Video
Date: February 15th, 2009
To: Elle ---, Tamira ---

So are you guys back yet? Everything is fine here back in T.O. - you know, same old... answering the most unbelievable questions about my trip and really realizing how little people know about Israel/ Palestine. There really are some dumb people out there. Give me a small update and tell huda that alicia says hi!
Xo
Chelsey

References

[1] ASWAT is a Palestinian lesbian organization in Haifa with members in both Israel and the West Bank.

Chelsey Lichtawoman is the co-founder of the fat activist and performance troupe The Fat Femme Mafia and has been touring and performing across Canada for over five years. She was also the host and curator of Granny Boots, the weekly radical queer performance night at the Gladstone Hotel. Chelsey recently had her first photography show entitled All About Her: versions of the woman exposed, which showcased her photos of Toronto queers. You can visit her at <http://www.chelseylichtman.com>.



DANA CLAXTON AND THE GRACEFUL ART OF RAGE

Dana Claxton | Dayna McLeod

Spanning photography, installation, performance and video, Dana Claxton's work is fierce.

Influenced by her experience as “a Lakota woman, as a Canadian, a mixed blood Canadian, and [her] own relationship to the natural and supernatural world”[1], Claxton's work is powerful, emotive and graceful. Her single channel video, Buffalo Bone China, shown here, demonstrates this intensity. Featuring a rich, mesmerizing soundtrack of drumbeats and vocal chanting that is set against a synthesized atmospheric background, Buffalo Bone China “metaphorically recalls First Nations peoples' loss of the buffalo and the historical use of buffalo bone to make fine china. Specifically the work refers to British colonial practices that resulted in the decimation of the buffalo and the devastating effects upon First Nations people who relied heavily on the buffalo for their survival. Buffalo bones were gathered into huge piles on the prairie and some bones were exported to England to be used in the production of fine bone china.”[2]

Claxton's rumbling soundtrack underscores the intensity of found, black and white, footage of running buffalo which has been slowed down, and we see these great beasts travel

across the plains with labouring strength as one throbbing, cohesive, moving body. Just as we become comfortable, familiar even, with the ebb and flow of their movements and the undertow of the soundtrack, a man with a gun shoots his rifle. A close-up of a buffalo intimates his demise as a cacophony of symbols crash and the performer silently screams. Delicate pink, white and gold china appear in the frame - in the buffalos' place - which is now marked by a single buffalo skull. The skull is superimposed on the china as the symbols continuing to thunder, almost as if raining down on the china itself. Hands gently caress the plates and saucers, slowing the moment down for reflection. This calm is shattered by another silent scream from the performer as their long black hair is dragged across the dishes, blurring the line of where it has come from, what it is made of, what it means. The performer walks towards us, past the camera and through a gated archway covered in vines, super-imposed and shrinking against the running buffalo who keep running in slow motion. This video is dedicated to the Buffalo People.

NMP is lucky enough to have had a chance to talk to Claxton about her work, her process and what motivates her to create.



Dayna McLeod: In keeping with NMP's theme for this issue, how has "rage" and anger evolved in your work? Do you live this rage?

Dana Claxton: Well rage is beauty in many ways – its like a cleansing when you release it. Birthing rage!! I am not sure my work has ever had anger, so I can't comment on that. But rage...always! I think I live rage by feeling deeply.

DM: Your performance work often contains elements of ritual and ceremony. How do you see your relationship to your audience within this context?

DC: I want to give something beautiful.

DM: Are you offering a gift?

DC: In some work yes, that was my intention – to give spirit or the possibility of spirit.

DM: Is this an opportunity for healing?

DC: If that can happen, that is wonderful, certainly in my work with Primeaux and Mike the peyote singers who sang healing songs was to share this beauty with an art audience.

DM: What do you want back from your audience?

DC: Love and a connection.

DM: What do you want to give your audience?

DC: Hope, spirit, love.

DM: Where did The Patient Storm come from?

DC: A commission from Urban Shaman and curated by Ahaswis Maskegon Iskew.

DM: What inspired this video?

DC: Sky teachings and resistance.

DM: What is the text based on?

DC: I wrote it. But hiptrip hop, poetry and Lakota teachings.

DM: How did you make this piece?

DC: In the studio with the actors and post production.

DM: What is the AIM project?

DC: Beautifying the American Indian Movement and celebrating this movement's commitment to justice and autonomy.

DM: When you first discovered the confidential documents that you use within the project, did you have a visceral and/or emotional response to them?

DC: I thought they were beautiful in an odd kind of way – the blacked out sections were mysterious and telling at the same time. What they didn't reveal and what the documents did reveal. As well as the form and the colour.

DM: Your practice spans film, installation, photography and performance; how do you envision a piece when you begin it?

DC: Generally, the idea comes to me and I ponder and sometimes pray about the idea. The dream world also is a place for significant teachings.

DM: How do you decide what form it takes?

**My cultural and spiritual teachings
have enhanced my life, my work
and the way I walk in the world. I
have been inspired, perhaps even
forced to seek justice, as a result
of being born into a culture that is
oppressed.**

DC: For instance, I just made landscape # 2 – from an ancient vision quest site in Southwest Saskatchewan – we shoot on HD, while I was shooting the land decided that I had to be in the landscape, you know the spirit of art making can be very demanding! When it calls us, as artists we either respond or not and move on to the next project or calling. Sometimes a place or an object will call to be made into art and other time, I work ideas through.

DM: Are you inspired by media/medium?

DC: Absolutely, film, photography and performance inspire for their materiality and the multiple way of working with them.

DM: What is your favorite photograph that you have created and why?

DC: They all become favorites at some point and right now, this very moment its' Paint Up # 1.

DM: How has surrealism influenced your work? Do you consider yourself a surrealist?

DC: One could argue that the surrealist were influence by tribal cultures. If anything I am a supernaturalist!

DM: What artists have influenced your work?

DC: At the moment I am inspired by Kent Monkman, I really think we are contemporaries. Rebecca Belmore, Lori Blondeau, Jeff Wall, Marina Abramovic and Paul Wong.

DM: Do you see your practice and/or pieces that you have created as being in conversation with these artists?

DC: I think a lot of contemporary art is having a conversation.

DM: What are you working on now?

DC: A series of photos and an video installation on a secret topic.

DM: In your 1997 performance and installation, Buffalo Bone China, which was presented in Saskatoon at AKA Gallery in association with Tribe Inc, you smashed pieces of China to make bundles to place in a sanctified circle while an experimental video of buffalo played. What inspired this work?

DC: The Buffalo Nation and wanting to honour them as my relatives.

DM: How does the single channel video relate to the performance?

DC: That the buffalo were harmed, they are powerful and I honour them.

DM: How did the single channel video evolve out of this piece?

DC: I made the video, then did the live performance, then combined the two to make the installation.

That oppression hurt my family and myself deeply and hurt my mother and my grandmother. In some ways that historical oppression, of course is part of contemporary life and the structural dehumanization of Indian people still lingers.

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AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT



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December 7, 1972

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Application

AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT
EXTREMIST MATTERS -
AMERICAN INDIAN AFFAIRS

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[REDACTED] a source, with whom contact
has been insufficient to determine reliability, advised

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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100-462483-89

ENCLOSURE

FBI

Date: 12/8/72

Transmit the following in _____

(Type in plaintext or code)

AIRTEL

AIRMAIL

(Priority)

TO: ACTING DIRECTOR, FBI ATTN: DID

FROM: SAC, LOS ANGELES (157-8224) (P)

SUBJECT: AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT (AIM)
EM - AMERICAN INDIAN AFFAIRS

Re Los Angeles teletype to Bureau dated 12/1/72,
captioned, "AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT, IS - INDIAN MATTERS."

On 12/8/72, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA),
Los Angeles, California, provided the names of the following
AIM national leaders and their residences:

RUSSELL MEANS
Cleveland, Ohio

VERNON BELLECOURT
Denver, Colorado

CLYDE BELLECOURT
Minneapolis, Minnesota

DENNIS BANKS
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Calif

On 12/8/72, [REDACTED] Los Angeles County
Sheriff's Office, Intelligence Division, Los Angeles, California
requested descriptive and background data concerning above
individuals in order that they may be promptly identified
in future visits to Los Angeles.

- 3 - Bureau (AM) (RM)
- 2 - Cleveland (AM) (RM)
- 2 - Denver (AM) (RM)
- 2 - Minneapolis (AM) (RM)
- 2 - Los Angeles

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Special Agent in Charge

Sent _____

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Per _____



DM: You are of Hunkpapa Lakota ancestry: can you talk about how your heritage has shaped you as an artist and as an activist?

DC: My cultural and spiritual teachings have enhanced my life, my work and the way I walk in the world. I have been inspired, perhaps even forced to seek justice as a result of being born into a culture that is oppressed. That oppression hurt my family and myself deeply and hurt my mother and my grandmother. In some ways that historical oppression, of course is part of contemporary life and the structural dehumanization of Indian people still lingers. When you see injustice what do you do? I make art, I try and help others, I cry, I shout, I scream, I do, I feel, I think, I want, I want to participate fully in life and contribute.

DM: The Sky has been very important to your creative process. What is the significance of the Sky in Lakota teachings, and how do you approach translating its meaning to your audience?

DC: Well....everything you need to know is in the sky. The sky can teach us everything. So I ponder, I ask, I pray and I receive – the teachings to live a good life. As well the teachings in sky, reveal their manna through form and formations. I translate the goodness that sky shows me into art in some occasions such as the Patient Storm, which is about sky teachings and going-ons.

DM: According to Tania Willard, “The effects of colonization, discrimination, and systemic racism on Aboriginal people and on your own family history has fueled your early work.” How do you (do you, can you?!) resolve these issues in your life as an artist, activist, Canadian and Lakota woman?

DC: Great question ...of course the resolve is ongoing as is the oppression. I had to forgive, I know that sounds cliché, but forgiveness releases you from carrying the weight of it around. But with the forgiveness,

is also the knowledge of knowing the difficult history and present – so it still fuels my work. What did I have to forgive and why need to be considered. Pure resolve will only happen when aboriginal people are no longer harmed – so perhaps I won't ever be resolved, so I won't ever be content, so there's still lots of work to be made and work to do.

References

- [1] Tania Willard, Curator: Starting From Home: An online retrospective of Dana Claxton, 2007, (2010, 17, 09)
- [2] Brodie, Leah, Marketing & Communications Manager: Dana Claxton: Buffalo Bone China, Art at the MacKenzie, (2010, 17, 09)

Dana Claxton is an interdisciplinary artist whose work includes film and video, installation, performance and photography. Her work is held in public collections, including the Vancouver Art Gallery, Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Art Bank of Canada. Her work has been screened internationally, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Walker Art Centre (Minneapolis). Her work has been screened at Sundance Festival and Microwave in Hong Kong. <http://www.danaclaxton.com/>

“RAGE-O-HOLICS UNITE!”

RM Vaughn | Andrew Harwood

I have been dear, sisterly friends with the artist and provocateur Andrew Harwood for nearly 20 years, and yet we still indulge, about once every three years or so, in a good old fashioned scrap.

We are both chronic rage-o-holics (a term coined by Andrew, or, as I call him, Herself, years ago). My rage comes out in the strangest ways, almost like Lupus or some other mysterious disease that can attack without warning or symptom. Andrew’s rages are more direct, faster, and thus more easily dispelled.

If we were two families at the dinner table, I would be the family from Ordinary People, and Andrew would be the family from The Sopranos. I’m all slow burn and repression, Andrew is all outburst followed by loving regret.

As artists, our anger has taken us on very different paths. I write poems that are full of cruel twists, revenge plots, and insults. My plays are always about people hurting each other, and my videos have a reliable morbidity. Andrew, on the other, sparkly glove-covered hand, makes art that is covered in glitter, literally – installations, drag performances and gorgeous collages packed with optical

illusions, funhouse black light shine, and celebrity (and celebratory) glee.

What the hell? I am full of rage, and express it via indirection, crossword puzzle writing. Andrew is full of rage, and expresses it with a mitt full of sequins and an orange wig.

The Clash once sang “anger can be power”, but they never told us what anger might do to one’s art (thanks for nothing, you fake Marxist fucks). So, to puzzle out this rage-inducing topsy-turvydom, I contacted Herself by email and asked some very blunt questions. So far, we are not fighting about this article

Me:

Let's talk about rage as a creative force. For me, anger is a great motivator, and a lot of my writing is quite angry, and autobiographical. Do you find rage/anger motivating, and, if so, why is so much of your work so sparkly and fun? Is there a subtext that most people miss?

Andrew:

Art History is littered with angry manifestos!

Yes, anger and rage can be quite creative and inspiring! I think a lot of people are deathly afraid of their own anger and see it as negative. The Toronto Alternative Art Fair (TIAF) International was started, in part, out of rage and as a reaction against the conservatism of TIAF at the time. Pamila Matharu, Selena Cristo and myself formed TAAFI as result of literally not seeing ourselves represented at TIAF.

There is, generally, no subtext of anger in my visual art practice that I am aware of – although an art historian or art therapist might disagree. I am actually very interested in the concepts of pleasure and hedonism, in art and in Western culture, as they are still the most difficult notions for us to deconstruct, even harder than anger. There is a perception in Canadian art circles that art should not be enjoyable or entertaining, hence the sparkly and fun. This is one of my strategies or resistance to a hetero-normative art world/world.

Anger is such a pure emotion for us all that it has to be part of art and creativity. It can be, at times, the most delicious feeling of all. It is what keeps us alive and what lets us know what separates us from others in both positive and negative ways.

I have tried to channel anger and rage into change on my best days! And sometimes this fails. Sometimes living with failure is the best teacher of them all.

Me:

When you are in a rage, are you aware of it? Sometimes I stomp around my house and kind of catch myself doing it. Also, rage tends to turn into anxiety for me very quickly. How does rage transform you?

Andrew:

Yes, I am mostly aware of anger and rage - that was what all that therapy was for, silly! On occasion I catch myself getting upset and try to temper it, and other times I let it fly. I love hosting drag events with lots of noisy people because I have an outlet to yell at them and make them laugh – it's great catharsis, not just for me but also for the audience! I think I sometimes "perform" anger on stage for the audience.

Anger can make me painfully aware of my own foibles and sadly, those of other people. I have certainly stomped around, punched a hole in a wall once, intentionally broken things (not valuable stuff because I have been poor most of my life, so no Ming Vases smashed here) and lesser, benignly crazy things. I think we all do this to exercise the physicality of anger in ways that are intended not to hurt people, either physically nor emotionally. People also cry when they are angry because it's easier to either look or act sad, which I find fascinating. It's more "ok" to be sad than angry, which is such a ridiculous cultural construct, I guess it's less threatening, but just as stressful.

I have had my share of arguments and they are, partially, negotiations of feelings and needs. Feelings of betrayal and other people not telling me things are two huge triggers for anger in me. Everyone has their list of stuff that generally makes them crazy with frustration.

Me:

I don't regret anything I've ever made out of anger. Do you?

Andrew:

OMG yes! Mostly with people and I try to make amends as quickly as possible.

There is a very small handful of people that I will never make amends with, as that would be quite damaging to my psyche and maybe theirs, so I try to avoid them, if possible. These people are why curses were invented. Forgiveness was also created for the really important people! I try to make peace with everyone spiritually, if not in person.

I have a collection of letters called "The Bitter Letters of Marsha McLuhan" that I wrote, as one of my alter-egos, last summer that I love – I donated a couple to the A Space fundraiser and people bought them! They are private musings in some ways, but also quite funny to some folks.

So, no real regrets about any artworks that I may have made from rage inspiration. Ragespiration! I have had more regrettable situations than art. I have honestly made some bad art too, but not necessarily due to rage.

Me:

Is rage itself a form of creativity? Does it take an active, engaged mind to fully comprehend what is pissing one off?

Andrew:

Hmm. I think that when I look at Jubal Brown's work he somehow embraces rage and pissing folks off in a way that amazingly and beautifully aestheticizes anger. I am a little jealous of his ability to do this and he's such a sweet person! Maybe I am the opposite?

I think alienation is also a very important strategy for some artists to keep out of the mainstream. I think we are so afraid of anger, culturally, that we tend to have more fear of it than is necessary. Rage shows ya care! Passion over reason! Sure it's a form of creativity and perhaps culture is the best place for displays of rage and anger, as opposed to wars and big business. We should all take a cue from people engaged in consen-

sual SM and role play, they get to exercise some of their rage in mutually agreed upon sex and fetish play in the bedroom that can be quite healthy.

Rage and anger exist because people feel unjustly treated. I think repressed anger is not healthy either and it seeps out of people through institutions like spousal/family abuse, road rage, alcoholism, drug abuse, eating disorders, suicide, etc.

Fear is also a big part of what makes me and other people angry. Fear is just as necessary for our existence as anger. I know so many people who are super angry because they are not able to grieve the loss of loved ones, from familial dysfunction or from being victims of violent acts. We all get "taught" how to be angry by our families and society. Rage is pain's vomit.

Conversely, I am inspired by the ecological necessity of a forest fire. It seems so destructive to us because we enjoy the beauty of a green thriving forest and see the opportunities therein. A fire, though, is necessary to the long-term health of a forest and releases all sorts of chemicals for new growth, keeps the animal population to sustainable levels and some trees only release seeds when there is a fire. So hell yeah we need our anger, on occasion, to level things sometimes and start again!

Me:

Finally, what are the personal costs, outside of how it affects one's creativity? I would go back now and do many things differently, but I also know that "in the moment", my expressions of rage were very, very true and very necessary. I'm not talking about regret – regret is too easy. But, rather, taking one's patterns into account and adding up the tally, so to speak.



**Am I demanding?
Yes, sometimes. Have
people yelled at me
to get stuff done?
Yes. Have I yelled at
other people to get
stuff done? Yes. Have
I learned anything? I
am still learning.**

Andrew:

This is a good question; it is sometimes difficult to gauge the exact costs and effects of anger on one's own creativity. I may have missed opportunities in the art world because I may have been perceived as "difficult" to work with. I think that has happened to an extent. I have very high expectations of art and am often disappointed. A curator at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver said I was "Problematic," and I was pissed off that she said that, but friends put it into context for me and I kind of felt complimented by her statement, ultimately. When I arrived in Vancouver and worked on the show with her, she was super lovely to work with and there was no bad blood between us at all. It was also interesting that other people said that she had been "Problematic" to work with in her past positions and I did not experience that with her. This can be hard to measure.

Am I demanding? Yes, sometimes. Have people yelled at me to get stuff done? Yes. Have I yelled at other people to get stuff done? Yes. Have I learned anything? I am still learning.

Putting together installations and performances can be so stressful. We, as artists, don't really acknowledge this aspect of our work. Most of this process involves problem solving, even if these are self-created, in terms of planning the many elements of an exhibition – often with little or no money. We also present this work to the public, which can be an experience rife with anxiety!! Being an artist is stressful even if you have a great deal of personal success. The pressure of having to be creative all of the time has its emotional tolls too, and can lead to burnout in folks. The competitiveness for attention, criticality and sales or making a living are all gigantic hurdles that can, in part, create rage and anger. I know that all of these factors have made me feel angry and greatly frustrated at times. What pisses me off most are societal misconceptions of artists and associated poverty. (I know lots of other artists who feel the same way.) As Carla

Garnet, my dear friend, curator and former gallery dealer says, "There's no dental or retirement plan for artists!!" Our freedom as creative people is our greatest strength and weakness.

Oh and I have regrets too, I think its really important to have those moments of introspection to try not to repeat shitty stuff from the past. I also really try not to harbour resentments against people, this one can be hard and true forgiveness is also tough, yet in certain instances, and with some friends and family, forgiveness has come easily. As corny as this sounds, "time" does mend a lot. I have noticed, as I have gotten older, that revenge is such a seductive thing too. People who have done me dirt or have made me angry in the past were either jealous of me, in enormous pain themselves, or in love with me! Most times karma takes care of them for me. Then there are just the plain assholes in the world that need levelling and I seem to attract those types a lot.

My rage may have also drawn me to like-minded individuals and to people in the arts who are as passionate about things as I am. It may have also alienated people from me, but I think there has been a balance of both so far.

I try not to keep score or tally, this is hard to do, we tend to remember angry moments with more clarity and purity than the pleasant ones because of the intensity of our experience of this emotion. I have great friends and family members who are very, very patient with me too; I am very blessed in this regard. I have had hell-damner arguments with people that have torn relationships apart and, yet also greatly improved and enhanced them as well. Anger helps separate the wheat from the chaff.*

Without conflict there is neither growth nor new understandings of people or the world.

If I was a real rage-o-holic I shoulda told you to fuck off at the start of this!

Andrew x0x0x0x0x0

* I am not sorry, Vegans. Have some bread for Christ sakes, you look like you're starving, and don't get me going on the difference between yer eating disorder and yer politics LOL! I don't care. ;) >

RM Vaughan is a Toronto-based writer and video artist originally from New Brunswick. He is the author of eight books and a contributor to over 50 anthologies. His videos and short films play in galleries and festivals across Canada and around the world. Vaughan comments on art and culture for a wide variety of publications and writes a weekly visual arts column for The Globe and Mail. <http://www.rmvaughan.ca/>

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RAGE, OR THE LACK THEREOF

Yasmin Nair

A man stands chained to a fence, his face carefully composed in a look that can only be described as tele-genic martyrdom. He is wearing a camouflage military uniform, and a black beret. The fence, it turns out, is the one around the White House. The man's name is Dan Choi, it is March 2010 and he is set to become a symbol of all the contradictions of the new political rage in the United States.

What was Dan Choi so angry about in March—and again in April—of 2010? My leftist, anti-war heart beats more quickly at such a sight because I always imagine that the soldier in question is about to launch into a critique of the U.S war machine: “With this act, I declare the end of my allegiance to the project of death and destruction carried out by our country.” Or some such thing. You get the point.

So it was a disappointment to me to learn that Choi was protesting the fact that he, a gay soldier discharged under the U.S. military's “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” policy, was protesting his ouster and demanding to be let back in. Wait. “What was that again?” you ask? A man enters an institution, a man is unfairly ejected after it is discovered that he is gay, thus revealing, we must

assume, said institution to be deeply flawed and even dangerous. And then the man demands to be let back in. If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again...is Dan Choi insane?

No, to the best of my knowledge, but he is has frequently taken on the mantle of martyrdom, often comparing himself to historical figures like Martin Luther King and Mahatman Gandhi, as in an interview with Newsweek shortly after his first protest.[1] In the same interview, he spoke grandly against the stereotype of West Point graduates like him as a privileged people[2]: “We are tired of being stereotyped as privileged, bourgeois elites. Is someone willing to give up their career, their relationships with powerful people, their Rolodex, or their parents' love to stand up for who they are? I'm giving up my military rank, my unit—which to me is a family—my veterans' benefits, my health care, so what are you willing to sacrifice?”

One might be excused for being stunned into (temporary) silence at the sheer audacity of this statement. To date, over 50 million in the U.S are without health insurance. Millions work without benefits or have seen a sizable cut in them. Medical costs constitute

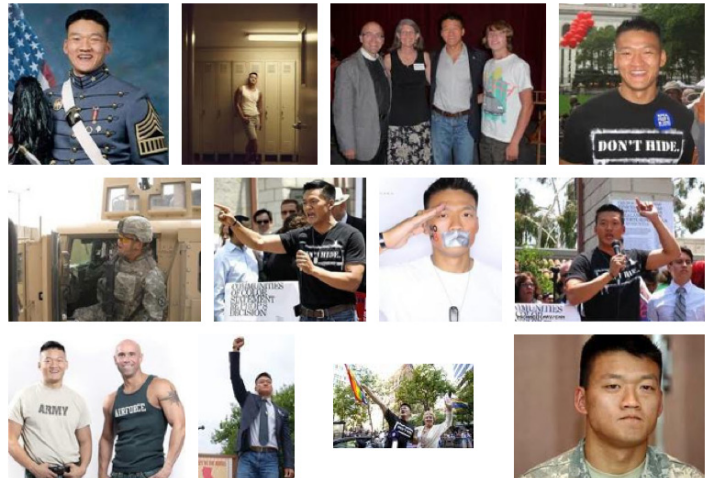
the leading cause of bankruptcy in the country. According to one report, citing a Harvard study, “62% of all personal bankruptcies in the U.S. in 2007 were caused by health problems—and 78% of those filers had insurance.”[3] Given all this, it is hard to be admonished by a member of the ever-shrinking elite with benefits when one has none to sacrifice. As for his question about whether or not the rest of us are willing to give up “relationships with powerful people”: he has, I think, a great many of us—who don’t have such relationships in the first place—stumped.

As if his statement about who has privilege and who does not was not startling enough, Choi went on to speak of his experience in Iraq, when the reporter asked him what it was like to be in jail: “I’ve detained people in Iraq, I’ve read them their rights, and I’ve applied handcuffs and zip ties. I’ve talked with people in Arabic who’ve just been arrested. I know what it means to arrest someone for my country’s mission. But I’ve never been incarcerated, and for something that I thought was not my country’s mission. I know my country’s mission is not to make an entire group of people into second-class citizens.”

This last sentence should give pause to anyone who knows anything of what goes on in Iraq and Afghanistan, or has even heard of the infamous Abu Ghraib photographs.

As expected, much of the gay press and community have held up Choi as their martyr. If there is dissension around him, it comes not from an examination of what his politics might mean but what they look like. While GetEqual, the group behind Choi, proclaims that it is “radical” for supposedly daring to engage in tactics like those used by Choi, the more conservative Human Rights Campaign (HRC), with a 35 million dollar budget, focuses on expensive fundraisers

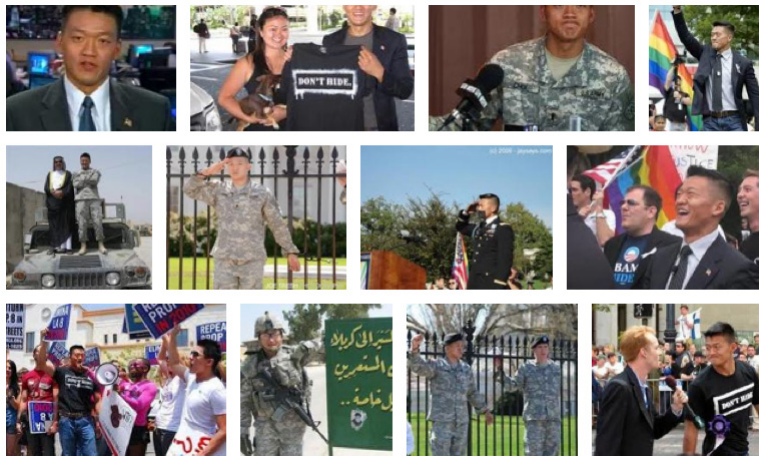
and lobbying politicians in D.C where the campaign is based. Broadly speaking, the mainstream LGBT community in the U.S. advances an agenda whose ideology ranges from the right to the centre of right. Issues like marriage, DADT, and hate crimes legislation take up the economic and political capital of the “community” while matters like the homelessness of queer youth or the drop in AIDS funding are routinely set aside with the explanation that the first three will take care of the rest. GetEqual, HRC, and GOPProud simply want the status quo—in the form of marriage and the rest—to be expanded to gays and lesbians. None of their activism, in any form, challenges the hierarchy established by marriage, for instance.



Which is to say: conservative issues like marriage, DADT, and hate crimes legislation are the emphasis in the mainstream gay community, and the only differences between such groups lie in the styles of the advocacy they engage in, not the content. Yet, a recent Washington Post article about the gay rights movement declared that HRC was on the left of the gay community and GOPProud, the gay Republican group, was on the right. The fact that both groups are fighting for exactly the same thing did not seem to have occurred to the reporter.

But therein lies the fundamental problem with the Left in the U.S: its utter inability to separate itself from conservatives and liberals who, after all, merely want more of the same. When it comes to defining who is left and who is right, the distinctions come down to style, not ideology. Under these circumstances, it is no surprise that Choi should emerge as the brave and angry martyr who has had enough and will risk such things as “relationships to important people.” And he is regarded as such even by those on the left, like Amy Goodman, the popular host of the progressive television and radio show Democracy Now, who should know better.

Amy Goodman is as popular as she is among lefties and liberals because she is often one of the few anti-war voices of reason on the radio. But Goodman has had Dan Choi on Democracy Now a few times and has never once criticised his fervent pro-war and pro-U.S imperialist rhetoric. Not only that, she has gone so far as to pen not one but two op-eds, one of them titled “Lt. Choi Won’t Lie for His Country,” in which



she repeated some of what he said to during a 2009 interview: “Choi got a message from an Iraqi doctor whose hospital Choi helped to rebuild while he was there. He said the doctor is ‘in South Baghdad right now.

And he’s seen some of the Internet, YouTube and CNN interviews and other appearances, and he said: ‘Brother, I know that you’re gay, but you’re still my brother, and you’re my friend. And if your country, that sent you to my country, if America, that sent you to Iraq, will discharge you such that you can’t get medical benefits, you can come to my hospital any day. You can come in, and I will give you treatment.’” More recently, Choi was on Democracy Now, in a debate with the queer radical anti-war activist Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, and said, “. . .war is a force that gives us meaning. War is a force that teaches us lessons of humanity and allows us to realize something about our society and teaches us the lessons that we probably should have learned before we went to war.” Neither Goodman nor Juan Gonzalez, her co-host, blinked an eye. Goodman has not simply featured Choi’s views on her show, she has explicitly endorsed them in her op-eds outside her role as show co-host.

Within today’s left, or what passes for the same, it is actually possible to have someone like Goodman, who has spent many hours among commentators critiquing the devastation caused to Iraq, listen to Choi talk about “rebuilding” a country that he is helping to bomb and destroy, without a single question about his politics. In this case, identity—and its efflorescence under a neoliberal war—becomes the excuse for war and it erases the possibility of a critique of Choi’s ideology. Even further, the war on Iraq becomes a staging ground for Choi’s personal dramas, a backdrop to the possibility of a doomed romance. As Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore

puts it, “How many Iraqis died in order for him to express the ‘truth of who I am?’ What about the truth of the war?...Did you hear that? He’s not worried about

dying in an atrocious war, or killing innocent civilians, but about whether his boyfriend will be notified.”[4]

Choi’s anger at having been expelled from the military and his on-the-surface radical tactics are symptomatic of the failure of the Left in the U.S to mobilise for the things that matter, like health care, leaving the political arena wide open for the likes of gay soldiers to angrily demand that they should be allowed to fight unjust wars. Modern times have rarely been worse in the United States, and yet, all over, there is anger about maintaining the status quo instead of meaningful change. Hence the growth of the Tea Party and its deployment of anger, much of it foolish and misplaced, as in the signs that read, “Keep the government out of my Medicare [the government’s form of health care for the elderly].”

In the wake of such struggles, what happens to the efforts of those who do fight for actual change?



Here in Chicago, I am a member of Gender JUST (GJ), a largely youth-led organisation that has, for nearly two years, successfully fought for a Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to institute a grievance process that would make it easier for students to report harassment and bullying. The current CEO of CPS, Ron Huberman is an out gay man with a partner and an adopted infant. For nearly two years, Huberman stalled on meeting with GJ and acting upon his promise to help make schools safer for youth, particularly queer youth, despite public promises to do so. Finally, the group decided to enact the kind of tactics long employed by direct action groups: it showed up at Huberman’s public appearances and even went to his

house with a basket of cookies and testimonials from youth who had been harassed and bullied. Eventually, after a series of such escalations, Huberman agreed to institute a grievance process.

In the wake of the protest outside his house, we were told by some that they were troubled or even offended by the fact that GJ would actually show up at the house—where his child was. It was as if GJ had shown up and threatened to take away the infant, or had

thrown stones at it. As Sam Finkelstein, one of the lead organisers, put it to me, “Why is no one thinking of the children and youth who suffer daily harassment and agony simply for going to school?” Implicit in the criticism of the actions was the idea that Huberman’s private residence should be invulnerable and that GJ had committed a major social infraction by daring to go to his house. This kind of logic is typical of protests in the U.S where dissent and protest have been nearly squelched by endlessly minute and refined bureaucratic efforts, via the process of having to ask for permits for every action or the constant admonition, during protests, to keep moving and stay on the sidewalk, instead of taking over the streets.

The students of Chicago's public schools study in the nation's most militarised school district; its largely minority and often poor population is constantly targeted by the U.S army for recruitment. Over the years, there has been admirable resistance to such militarization from many local educators on the left and groups like Gender JUST who have consistently been critical of such developments. Those criticizing GJ for its tactics failed to make the connections between Huberman's supposed imperviousness to protest while inside his home, and the extreme vulnerability of students within school walls.

Our rage, the productive sort which might actually demand change, is constantly being curtailed either by convenient distinctions between private and public or by a public discourse which fails to see the contradictions in a gay soldier who considers himself a second-class citizen of the U.S while handcuffing Iraqis. Rage appears in stylistic flourishes, as in the Tea Party protests where citizens rant and rave about policies about which they have little understanding or by soldiers demanding "fair" treatment in an institution that is fundamentally unfair to the rest of the world.

Rage has dissipated into conciliation and a call for the status quo.

References

[1] <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/03/21/this-is-my-mission.html>

[2] Choi was responding to criticisms that elite military personnel like him, who graduate from institutions like West Point and choose to enter the military with specialised skills, are different from the much poorer young Latino/a or African American youth aggressively recruited by the army with the explicit promise of social mobility. The U.S military still boasts of the G.I Bill of 1944 as the best example of how it provides college or vocational education for returning veterans, along with various loans for homes and businesses. But today, with military service being largely voluntary, the military must rely on aggressive and even duplicitous forms of recruitment. In its advertising, it shamelessly deploys narratives about troubled youth of colour within single-mother households who need the discipline, targeting them as ideal candidates for "discipline" on its visits to high schools (where it is allowed to enter for recruitment purposes); it even goes so far as to recruit undocumented youth with the false promise of eventual citizenship. Today, the military depends on a two-tier system for recruitment: elite soldiers like Choi, who enter voluntarily and the economically and politically disenfranchised who join out of desperation.

[3] http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/content/jun2009/db2009064_66...

[4] http://www.bilerico.com/2010/08/a_fine_romance_democracy_news_amy_goodma...

Yasmin Nair is a Chicago-based writer, academic, and activist. She is a member of Gender JUST (<http://www.genderjust.org>) and the Against Equality collective (<http://www.againstequality.org>). Her work has appeared in publications like Bitch, Time Out Chicago, Maximum RockNRoll, makeshift, Discourse and the first AE book, Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage. Nair is currently at work on a book about affect and neoliberalism, and can be reached at [nairyasmin\[at\]yahoo.com](mailto:nairyasmin[at]yahoo.com). Her website is <http://www.yasminnair.net>

My leftist, anti-war heart beats more quickly at such a sight because I always imagine that the soldier in question is about to launch into a critique of the U.S war machine: “With this act, I declare the end of my allegiance to the project of death and destruction carried out by our country.”

CAGED RAGE: A CONVERSATION WITH KYISHA WILLIAMS

Zaheen K | *kyisha williams*

kyisha williams is a vibrant, radical, black, queer, high femme, sex positive, activist, survivor, fighter and writer. She is a community organizer and support worker within black/queer/trans/racialized/criminalized/HIV+/HCV+ communities. She is also the director of red lips [cages for black girls], her debut short film that explores black/racialized/criminalized/queer/trans identity and its relationship with the prison-industrial complex. It attempts to articulate links between interpersonal and systemic violence, while celebrating the ways in which we survive and celebrate ourselves. I recently caught up with kyisha to find out more.

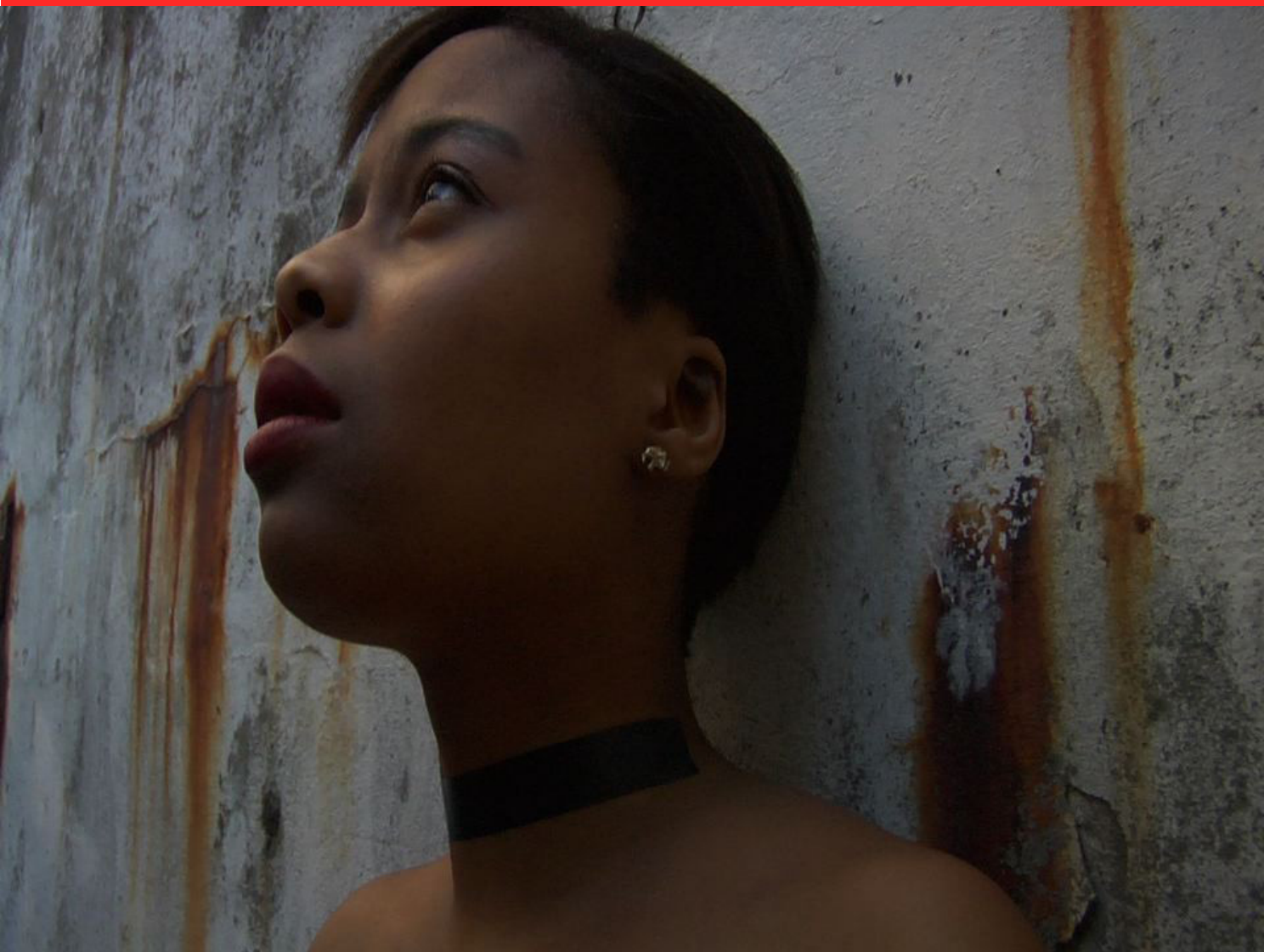
Zaheen K.: Can you tell me a little bit about the process of making this film? Have you been able to have any screenings?

kyisha williams: The process was almost all about letting go for me (the woman who's story was supposed to be highlighted couldn't take part. – time constraints, etc.). I learned that the film has a life/journey of its own, and I needed to respect that while still

maintaining the integrity of the project, and I think I managed to do so. I worked with some really amazing folks like Gina Nam (cinematographer), Monica Forester, Dainty Smith and Chiedza (my beautiful and talented cast).

There were some big and little hiccups along the way in terms of group process (I was part of the legacy video project by the Inside Out Film Festival), as well as dealing with racism, classism and ageism within the group. Though, I think we all came out in one piece and the Inside Out staff were attentive to what was happening.

The film has screened a bunch of times, and I feel really blessed and happy about that. It seems people really want to explore and talk about the issues. It has screened at the Inside Out Film Festival, The Trigger Arts Festival, Fruit Loopz PRIDE Stage, Queer West Film Festival, and as part of a 'Prison Justice' themed Trans Film night at the Centre for Women and Trans people at the University of Toronto.



ZK: What motivated you to make this film? What/who are your influences?

kw: My experience in this world (that I wasn't meant to survive in) motivated me to make this film. I have a complicated existence in which I experience various advantages and disadvantages. I wanted to talk about my (and other working class Black Queer and Trans people's) complicated experiences of the world and how things like interpersonal and systemic violence feed into each other and oppress us.

ZK: So would you say that this film came from a pretty personal place?

kw: I would say so, yes. Personal and from my communities.

ZK: Is this your first time working in film?

kw: Yes! So I think I really wanted to talk about and do EVERYTHING. I had to scale down a bit. Editing is not my forte (lots of minute technical details), directing is. Editing was really hard in terms of tech but also in terms of content. Its also really complicated stuff to talk about and explore.

ZK: There are many themes in your film, i.e. racism, sexism, trans/homophobia, sex work, prison justice, etc. How does it all come together for you?

kw: Put most simply, prisons are filled with our people (racialized, colonized, sexualized, trans, queer bodies). We are disproportionately represented in the "criminal justice" system.

This film is about criminalized identity – meaning that some people experience a much higher level of policing and incarceration based on who they are and how they live. Certain behaviours are heavily criminalized and some are not, for example, illicit drugs like crack cocaine versus prescription medication. Based on

systems of power, a disproportionate number of certain people, i.e. Indigenous, Black, People of Colour, Trans, Queer, disAbleD, people who use illicit drugs, folks with low income, etc. end up in prison. They are used as free labour instead of building resources in our communities such as housing, [anti-oppressive] education, and employment that would actually allow for success. Also, unapologetic sexuality/identity (like sex work or the case of New Jersey 4) is often criminalized.

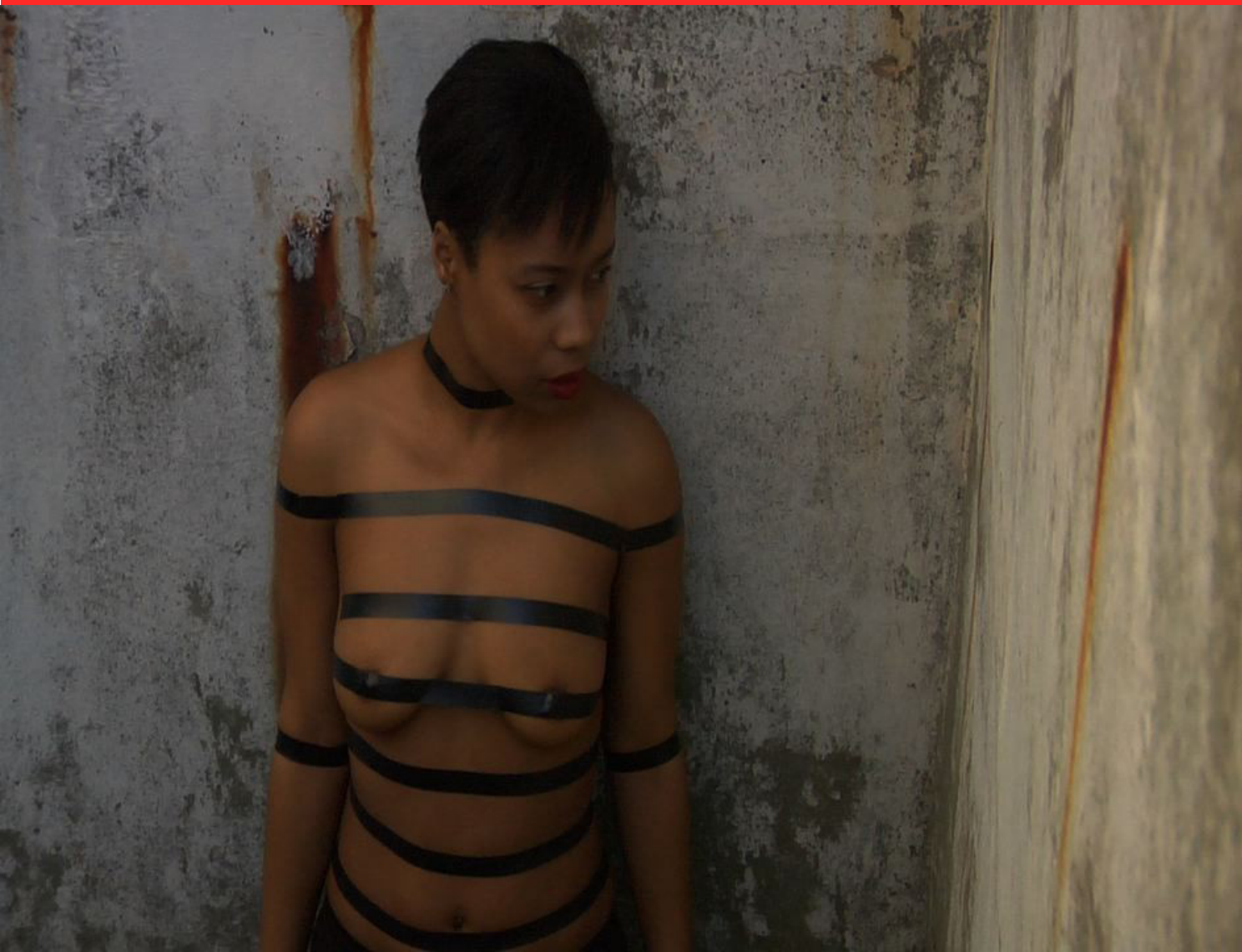
ZK: I agree completely. Especially with the recent G20-related arrests, I think that people forget that many communities are already experiencing this level of police presence and targeting.

kw: Yes, totally. I think the G20 stuff really woke people up and people were saying "we now live in a police state", and we really had to remind people that this is so not new. It's just happening to upper/middle-class/white/straight people and therefore being "noticed" more.

ZK: You stay true to the film title red lips with the abundance of red and lipstick-related imagery and metaphor. Why did you choose that title?

kw: I choose the title red lips for several reasons relating to femme identity, stereotypical (and reclaimed) images of sex work and sluttiness. Also, as imagery regarding violence (blood).

I notice when I wear red lipstick I get more attention from men who think I'm working or available/slutty (and straight). They get upset when I don't respond to them in the way that they want (because its not for them, like I mention in my film).



ZK: It's that weird dichotomy of women having to be stereotypically sexy-looking for society, but when we are, we're demonized for it.

kw: Yeah, totally.

ZK: I liked the part of the film where you and one of the more butch-appearing women were getting dressed together to go out. And the track playing over the scene was perfect. Can you tell me more about that?

kw: The song is called "Red Lipstick (JBemix)", it's about two queer/lesbian women who love each other, go out to dance with their communities and get queer bashed by cops on the way home. It's performed by Deep Dickollective (lyrics by Marcus Rene' Van/music by Jeree Brown and Benjamin Frost). It's super powerful and beautiful and raw.

ZK: I feel like as queer and trans people of colour, folks don't know how to read us. There are so many stereotypes out there about "how we're supposed to be".

kw: Yeah, I think that people become threatened.

ZK: In the film you mention "femme armour", as if it is a form of protection but also pride. Can you expand on that a bit? Do you find that black women's sexuality, especially one that is not "as it seems", intimidating or threatening for mainstream society?

kw: Yes, femme armour! Pride and protection – you hit it right on the head. As I said in my film, no one can fuck with me when I'm in my femme armour (dressed well, maybe make-up, maybe heels). I feel that I am untouchable because in those moments I have tuned into my power as a Black Queer Femme and I am confident

and sure of my beauty, intelligence and power. I can feel harnessed power from my ancestors (those who came before me) through jewellery and clothing given to me by my grandmother and great grandmother. I think that people are threatened by this unapologetic power and intelligence.

I also do it through my (recovered) spiritual relationships with those who have survived before me, through community, through created family and supporting each other.

ZK: So your spiritual relationships help you empower yourself not just as a woman, but as a femme?

kw: For me, 'woman' and 'femme' are linked. Femme is my gender.

So in other words, my spiritual relationships empower me to be my best most comfortable and sexy self.

ZK: It was bittersweet to see that your film was dedicated to the memory of Mirlande Demers, a fierce survivor and activist. Our society definitely did fail her. It was bitter-sweet because since her passing, I hadn't seen much in the mainstream press or activist circles about her memory. It was nice to see your acknowledgment of her. Did you ever meet her? Would you say that her memory inspired you while making this film?

kw: Oh Mirlande, I miss you!

ZK: Me too!

kw: Mirlande was a radical fierce black femme. We became fast friends when we met in Ottawa on a panel about intersectional oppression. She spoke about growing up in Quebec and how frustrating it was to try and talk about racism, homophobia and ableism

there, because the entire discourse of oppression was around the French language. This discourse was, of course, dominated by white people.

In a prison context, those women dealing with intersecting webs of oppression experience policing and incarceration differently (read: often worse) than others. For example, Indigenous women make up 50% of maximum security prisoners. Trans people are incarcerated in facilities of their “biological sex” and thus experience more physical and sexual abuse and extreme isolation inside prison.

Mirlande talked about these things, we made links like this – when I was making the film I felt a voice was missing, and I realized it was hers. She would have been so valuable in these dialogues and she is. This was my way of including her in the project.

ZK: I remember when I heard of her death, it was an accident actually. I was sitting at my desk job at the time, and stumbled upon it on the internet. I just sat there in my cubicle and cried. It was so strange, but really sad at the same time. Is this symptomatic of everything you talk about in your film? That history is still repeating itself? Amazing, fierce women like Mirlande are still getting erased from our consciousness.

kw: Yes, we need to continue to talk about these women and tell each other these stories. She lives in our memory and in my heart (and on my altar). And she (and so many others) help to keep me (us) surviving.

ZK: What are your upcoming plans for the film? Are you thinking of any other projects?

kw: Yes! I want to work on five million projects [laughs]. But for now I’m focusing on about three, not

sure in what order. One film is more fun/funny, it’s about racism and my experience as a black woman with dreds. It’s told through the eyes of the dreds. One is a playful celebratory short piece on pussies/cunts/jams/boygina’s, etc. And the other is about women’s experiences within prison (a more detailed documentary style piece).

ZK: Those all sound great, I can’t wait to see them! And for the record, this is the first time I’ve heard the term “boygina”. And I kind of love it.

kw: Yep, they are fantastic!

ZK: Thanks for taking the time to talk to me today. Best of luck with the film.

kw: You’re welcome, and thank you!

To catch a screening of red lips or to organize one in your own city, get in touch with kyisha at redlips.director@gmail.com.

kyisha williams is a radical, black, queer, high femme, sex positive, activist, vibrant, survivor, fighter and writer. She is a community organizer and support worker who does work within black/queer/trans/racialized/criminalized/HIV+/HCV+ communities.

Zaheen K. is currently holding it down in Ottawa, and has been a community organizer there for over 5 years. Some of the groups she organizes with are Agitate! (a collective of queer and two-spirit people of colour and Indigenous people), the Sexual Assault Support Centre of Ottawa, and Ladyfest Ottawa. When she’s not working at her student activist-y day job, she can usually be found wasting her time on the internet either checking out food porn or watching bad internet tv (her current drug is the Real L Word). The top hits on her playlist right now are Sade and Ponytail.

CANADIANS GET A GOOD SPANKING

Nicholas Little

In September the Ontario Superior Court struck down three Criminal Code provisions that made the exchange of sex for money in Canada all but impossible without breaking the law. Communicating for the purpose of prostitution, prostitutes sharing their income with others and maintaining or being found in a brothel will all cease to be offences in the province of Ontario. If upheld on appeal, the ruling may eventually lead to the decriminalization of prostitution throughout Canada.

At a press conference immediately following the ruling, professional dominatrix Terri-Jean Bedford, one of three sex workers who brought the court challenge forward, was asked how she intends to celebrate her victory. "I'm gonna spank some ass - legally!" she replied, brandishing her black riding crop.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's backside must be feeling rather sore. Activists would have been thrilled with even one of the laws being struck down, but nobody expected Madam Justice Susan Himel to gut three of the major provisions at once or to deny the government an 18 month delay before her ruling takes effect. The milestone decision left the federal government scrambling.

A *Globe & Mail* editorial published in the same week lamented that the task of liberalizing prostitution law belongs to elected legislators, not an appointed judge. "Who is she to weigh all the potential harms at stake and decide matters, on either side? Who says she can do a better job than Parliament?" the editors asked with indignation that one doubts even they took seriously.

After all, in 2006 the Canadian Parliament's own Subcommittee on Solicitation Laws urged the government to "recognize that the status quo with respect to Canada's laws dealing with prostitution is unacceptable" and that the laws may cause more harm than they prevent. These calls for Parliamentarians to act fell on deaf ears with no legal change even attempted. And on dead ears as well. The Subcommittee's inquiry was partly in response to serial killer Robert Pickton's admission of murdering 49 women on his Vancouver pig farm throughout the 1990s and 2000s. If four dozen women's deaths were insufficient to motivate MPs, it seems unlikely that risk-averse politicians in the current minority government will take action anytime soon.

Still, even opponents of decriminalisation seem to realize that the ruling means they have ultimately lost the battle. In an opinion piece about the judgment, National Post columnist Barbara Kay spat sour grapes at “shameful” prostitutes and “pathetic” and “pathological” swingers. Despite going through the motions, Kay conceded that it is now only a matter of time until sex work is legal across the land. “The challenge will doubtless go up to the Supreme Court of Canada,” she whined, “And I am pretty sure I know what way it will go.” Her hunch is based on the Supreme Court’s history of holding Parliament to account when it denies groups their Charter rights. In other words: done deal.

Kay’s column lays bare the tensions surrounding this and similar social justice debates in Canada. The stereotype of a progressive nation of pot-smoking liberals underestimates the passive-aggression of a people keen to see themselves as champions of social justice but conflicted about what that means on the ground. In Canada, landmark changes like same-sex marriage, the decriminalization of prostitution and the inevitable decriminalization of drug use are not the result of forward-thinking citizens who can’t bear ir-

rational policy. They tend to be the product of slow, painstaking activism by individuals who mount costly court challenges. Time and again, minorities have had to force Canada against its will to recognize the equal status of all its citizens.

In this sense, Terri-Jean Bedford’s ass-spanking intentions aren’t just a silly quip from a hooker high on her hard-won judicial victory. Bedford’s arrival at court in head-to-toe leather, riding crop in hand, may have been jarring to some, but it is a fitting image for a nation being brought into line by a woman who refuses to be forced into submission. After all, she’s the professional.

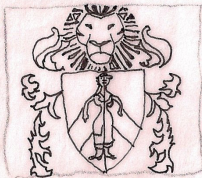
Nicholas Little is an Anglo-Albertan who decamped to Montreal sometime in the late nineties “to learn French and be gay”. He then moved to Ottawa, Ontario, where he taught workshops on how to give better blowjobs and moonlighted as an escort for bicurious bureaucrats on Parliament Hill. He also helped found POWER (Prostitutes of Ottawa-Gatineau Work, Educate & Resist), an organization of current and former sex workers advocating for recognition of their labour, Charter and human rights. Since 2009, Nicholas has lived and worked in the UK. You can find more of his writing at www.ickaprick.com or contact him at [nico \[at\] ickaprick \[dot\] com](mailto:nico[at]ickaprick[dot]com)

THE ILLUSTRATED GENTLEMAN

Elisha Lim

Elisha Lim was born in Toronto and grew up in Singapore, in a Catholic convent girls' school overrun with queers, many of whom inspire their first graphic novel 100 Butches. Elisha finally came out in Berlin, and embarked on a sharp learning curve of feminist squat houses, queer trailer parks, transgender pride parades and an Ethical Slut reading group. Elisha was thrilled to be named "Artist in Residence" by Curve, a "Queer Woman to Watch" by afterellen.com, and to run their strips in magazines like Diva, LOTL, CapitalXtra! and NOMOREPOTLUCKS. One of their biggest thrills to date is to be the first exhibit at Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue's inspiring brand new Feminist Art Gallery, aka FAG.

Elisha's first book 100 Butches will be published next year and the 2011 Wall Calendar "The Illustrated Gentleman" is currently on sale at <http://www.etsy.com/shop/elishalim>



The Illustrated Gentleman



disha



this shirt looks good buttoned all the way up, or with a scandalous amount of unbuttoned buttons

Sammy said that she wanted to get the boots. "What about the hot hightops?" I said. "No I like these," she said. "They feel unpretentious and practical. I feel like I could be going out to my cabin." I didn't see anything practical about that but they looked really cute.



In the changeroom

We went to CSquared and we decided that it was queer friendly. CSqueer if you will. When Sammy asked for men's shirts to fit her, the assistant said "the small sizes will fit for sure, they're European." This pleased Sammy very much. She said, "they know what I need to hear. European smalls always fit me." When she asked for fitted jeans the assistant motioned to both halves encouragingly. "These are the womens' jeans," she said, "and over here are the men's." It didn't seem like she was necessarily queer friendly, she just seemed like a more sensible businessperson than the majority of homophobic store assistants that we'd met.

Sammy

I usually buy my jeans from the womens' section, as long as they're androgynous. And by that I mean they're not too tight at the ass, and the crotch hangs a bit. Sometimes I like dressing in a way that makes me seem like I can kick some ass, sometimes as a reaction to a recent experience of homophobia or racism or whatever. Then ever since I started earning a paycheque I've been wanting to buy classier clothes that make me feel good. I used to envy my shopping friends. When I shop I don't think about style or print. I think more about shape. Even if it has a great print, a boxy shirt isn't worth it. I think, will this fit my face shape? Will this cardigan match my shirts? Will this fall nicely on my body? Is this classy? My fashion role models are Kanye West and Zac Efron. No seriously. I like the way Zac Efron dresses.

THE HUMBLE CRAFTSMAN: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY GAUTHIER

Mary Gauthier | M-C MacPhee

*In September of this year I was fortunate enough to see Mary Gauthier perform songs from her new album *The Foundling* at Hugh's Room in Toronto. I caught up with her soon after the show to discuss the stories and experiences behind this profound album. Below is our conversation.*

M-C MacPhee: Your new album, *The Foundling*, was really important for you, can you tell us a bit about what inspired it?

Mary Gauthier: Well, it's an autobiographical song cycle that talks about adoption and all the consequences of not knowing who your family of origin is. It's a series of songs that will hopefully add up to what I think of as a little movie.

M-C: Can you describe the process of writing something so personal?

MG: Well it took about two years to write it and I had to dig really deep and I did a lot of work on understanding the process of coming to terms with what it means to be adopted. It was lengthy. It was challenging. Ultimately it was a wonderful experience to be able to write about it.

M-C: It seems like you often write about really challenging personal struggles. Would you say that this is the biggest one you've tackled?

MG: Oh I don't know. It's hard to measure them, isn't it? I know that this was a challenge to write and I'm a better writer for it. I really raised the bar on myself for this one. I'm glad to say that I got to the other side of it. And I've learned some things, and I've grown, and I think I've become a better writer having challenged myself to do this.

M-C: Has this album changed your artistic process significantly?

MG: No. Mostly I still sit down and just work really hard everyday and try to get the best possible songs that I can and try to uncover the mystery inside of each song.

M-C: I can't imagine what it must be like to have to blend the two worlds. What I mean is that it must be difficult to focus on putting out an album wanting the song to fit

together, and producing songs that have so much personal truth in them. Is it difficult to blend those two things together? To get the great song—the hit—but to have that great song come out of something so honest and emotional?

MG: the challenge is to make sense of what our experiences are as human beings and I think artists get an opportunity to do that in their work and I think it's a real wonderful gift to have this be your job: to make sense of your life. To make sense of my life is my job as a writer and I'm really grateful for the opportunity to sit there and try to work things out and make it all rhyme and put a melody behind it and then to sing it to people.

M-C: You came to songwriting quite late, right?

MG: Yeah in my mid-thirties I started writing songs. Prior to that I was a chef. I cooked Louisiana-style food in a restaurant that I was part owner of.

M-C: Were you always a storyteller?

MG: Well, I guess. I come from the South. I was born in New Orleans and we have a long tradition of storytelling in our culture. I came from there so it was probably implanted in me at some point.

M-C: But growing up, it wasn't something that you found yourself doing all the time? A lot of storytellers I know have said that as kids they were always making shit up and telling stories and doing whatever they could to get their story heard. Is that something you did?

MG: No, it was more scholarly for me. I'm more of a writer than a big talker. I use research and do a lot of word play and I work hard at my desk more than talking in a bar.

M-C: You went from being a chef to picking up and becoming a song writer much later in your life. What was the drive for you to have your stories heard? Personally, I can't imagine making the shift from a life where I didn't have a public voice to suddenly needing that voice to be out there and to be heard in the world. What was the motivation for you and where did it come from?

MG: Well, I always wanted to be a songwriter but I just didn't have the courage. What had to happen was I had to quit drinking and I had to get sober. I had a big drug and drinking problem and I had to get sober. I did that in 1990 and from there, the creative process just started to unfold. I got more creative and I got healthy. And then I was able to do what it took to create songs. I had always wanted to, but I didn't understand that it was work. I thought you either had the gift or you didn't, and I learned after I got sober to apply myself and do the work. It's hard work. It's great work but it's hard. I really had to just sit down and learn a new skill, a new craft. It took a long time: 10 years really.

M-C: Who helped you along the way? Was it coming from a personal drive to learn or did you also have a lot of good coaches and inspirations?

MG: I took a lot of songwriting workshops with songwriters that I admire and I also came to Nashville and studied with people who were professional songwriters and I surrounded myself with other people who were writing at the level that I was writing at, and I built a community of writers and artists around me. It was cumulative. I started playing wherever I could play and I stared to get better at it. It took time and I'm still learning, I probably always will be a student of this craft...it's very mysterious.

M-C: Do you keep learning new things all the time, and do these things actually surprise you?

MG: No, they don't surprise me because art is complex and it builds on itself. Artists borrow from each other all the time and it just builds on itself and if you're not growing and learning then you're probably some sort of an oldies act and just repeating yourself...sort of stagnant and not able to create in a new way. Remaining teachable is a big part of this journey, I think. To remain vital as a creative person, you've got to be teachable and always go into that place where you don't know where you are.

M-C: That takes a fair bit of courage to do...

MG: Well if you're going to be an artist, you had better have some courage. There's not a whole lot of dignity in it and there's not a whole lot of glory. That's a misconception, people confuse being an artist with reality tv. It's not like that. It's a journeyman's work and it's a humble craft. I'm a humble craftsman. People sometimes know who I am and they recognize the songs but it's not about the glory: it's about the journey of making something out of nothing. I'm actually the happiest when I'm creating something...when I'm going from zero to one.

M-C: A lot of people who are journeymen or crafts people and who work in trades where they are creating, their medium isn't necessarily something that's so personal. What you're writing about and what you're fine-tuning are these beautiful, intense and emotional personal stories...that must be difficult. How do you find that medium different from other forms of expression that you've worked with? Is song writing, or performing, more challenging? Does it take just dropping your dignity all together and just putting yourself out there?

MG: Yes, I think a big part of the job is to forget that people are looking at you and to just get honest. I know for me that when I'm writing about me I'm very aware that it's actually not just about me. That whatever I go through is just part of the human condition and it connects me to the rest of humanity. I'm not unique, I'm not different, and my experiences aren't that far from everyone else's, and I know it. And as I reveal my journey, people all over the world come up to me and say, "How did you know that about me?" So I think artists often chalk themselves up as the example, but I'm very aware that I'm not doing my job if I'm not showing other people who they are. I reveal myself, but it's not just myself, it's the human condition that I'm really trying to reveal.

M-C: If you're constantly reminding yourself of that while you're working through these tough emotions, it must give you a lot of strength to know that you're not alone in that, that there is some really hard stuff and that people are there with you...

MG: That's right and it also gives me a goal to get it out there so that I can connect with other people who are going through it, so we can compare notes. It's a wonderful job, I've gotta tell you, I've got a really good job.

M-C: Do you think that the courage you have to put so many of your personal stories out there comes from your past? You have worked through (what people refer to as) "your troubled youth". Do you think overcoming that time in your life gave you a lot of the strength you have now?

MG: I think so. Surviving alcoholism and drug addiction and getting to the other side of it, well, whoever has done that is aware that every day is a borrowed day. I have a song on The Foundling called Another Day Borrowed. We're living on time that we shouldn't even have...if we got what we deserved, we wouldn't

be here. So, having that liberation and that exhilaration of just being glad to be here makes it so much easier to reveal, and to be grateful, and to get to that place where the good songs are.

M-C: I know some people who have struggled with alcoholism or who have had “rough pasts” and they never thought that they would live to see 25, and when they did, everything changed for them. They started seeing things in a whole new light and feeling really happy that they were living on this borrowed time, but then they started owning that time and thinking “this is me, this is what I’m doing, and this is what I deserve”. Did you feel that way... that maybe you wouldn’t get to a point where you would be really happy or really proud of yourself?

MG: I certainly had that. I didn’t think I would live to see 30 and if I had kept going the way I was going, I wouldn’t have. Surviving that kind of a terminal illness and coming out the other side liberates you to do and say things that you wouldn’t have done without having gone through that. It changes you and makes you able to talk in ways that are different from people who haven’t survived a terminal illness. As an artist, it’s been a creative boom for me. It’s been a huge door to walk through and it’s made me a better – not a better – but a more creative person.

M-C: A lot of the emotional honesty that I hear in your songs seems to come from a very matter-of-fact place; a place of understanding that sadness and loneliness and hardships do exist and that they’re there and that they are ok. There always seems to be a sense of calm around a lot of the really difficult things that you bring up in your song writing.

MG: Thank you, I take that as a compliment. I guess my delivery can be that way to a fault; it’s a little too calm sometimes. But in some ways, I’m reporting, I’m telling what I’ve already been through so I’m not going through it as I tell it—it’s a reflection.

M-C: Has that sense of calm always been there for you when you’ve been working through personal struggles or were your emotions once filtered through anger or sadness and rage and those kinds of harder emotions?

MG: Oh I go through that all the time, but I have to get to the other side of it to write about it. I have to work through it and get to a place where I can tell people about it. I can’t make sense of it when I’m in the middle of it; I’m too emotional. Songs are a reflection on something that I’ve worked through or that I’ve worked through with that song.

M-C: If song writing is about reporting things that you’ve worked through, would you say that nostalgia plays a role in your song writing or is it really just about reflecting on your past?

MG: I don’t have a lot of nostalgia because the things I’ve worked through aren’t usually things that you want to revisit. I feel gratitude to be on the other side of those things, so it’s more of a “phew, I survived another one” feeling.

M-C: I read an interview you did recently about The Foundling. In it you said that your birth mother is a woman with a secret and that she isn’t at a place where she’s able to work through it. If I’m correct in saying that, I wonder if the experience of how that secret has affected you has changed the way that you relate to honesty or secrecy?

MG: Well that's just a hard question...I don't even know where to begin with that one. Mostly, I'm trying to find compassion for her. You know, I don't really have any secrets, I put all my stuff into the songs and most of my secrets are on my Wikipedia page. You're not going to dig up any dirt on me because I've written about it myself. Which I think may fall under "the best defense is a good offense" but I think that ultimately, my work with being a secret, and being her secret, is to find compassion for her.

M-C: So I guess that is something you worked through in the process of writing The Foundling?

MG: Yeah, that began the process but I think I'm still in it...I may be in it for the rest of my life. And that's ok...we're all in processes that may last a lifetime. I try not to be angry, I try not to be bitter, I try not to feel sorry for myself that my momma won't meet me, and I try to have compassion for the situation she was in. Pre-feminism women had it really, really, hard. Not that we have it easy now, but in the south in New Orleans in 1962 an unmarried pregnant woman was a woman in deep trouble – trouble of the worst kind. The shame that was put on these poor women is immeasurable today. We can't even imagine being in that world.

M-C: Were you able to find some kind of emotional closure through putting The Foundling together?

MG: No, I can't have closure with her walking around, and me walking around, and us not being able to meet each other. The most I can have is compassion and I can try to find a way to let it be what it is. But closure is not possible... because it's still open.

M-C: You said in another interview that you were considering looking for your birth father. Is that still on the table for you?

MG: The problem is, she's the only one who knows who he is and she won't tell me, so I don't have access to that information. If I had his name, I'd call him right now but I don't, and I can't get it. I suppose I could get a private detective to try to trace her footsteps from back in '62 and see if we could find where it all came to pass, but it just seems like such an ordeal, and the likelihood of finding it...I just don't know.

The problem is, I could go to her sister and ask her but then I would ruin the secret that she's built but I just don't want to do that, you know, I'm in a quandary. Should I do that, or should I not? I don't know. The years go by and I just wait, I don't know the answer to that.

M-C: Did she ask you not to?

MG: She did.

M-C: That's kind of heartbreaking...

MG: In a way...but I do have my adopted family, and my adopted brothers and sisters, and I have my family of choice, and my friends. It's disappointing. I don't think it's the end of the world. I think there are parts of myself that I can't know until I get some answers from her. I don't know if it's heartbreaking. I think it's frustrating, you know, but some days it seems more important than others.

M-C: Is building a strong community of friends and family something that you've been committed to over the years?

MG: Oh yeah, it's been a lifesaver. It's been the most important thing that I've ever done and continue to do.

M-C: You've said - and it's very clear in a lot of your songs - that there is a sort of restlessness about you and that you've always been on the move.

MG: Yeah, that's right.

M-C: And I read somewhere that you were debating, or maybe even working on, staying. Seeing what it means to actually stay.

MG: Yeah, that's been a challenge...learning how to do that. I can't say I've mastered it, but I work on it daily.

M-C: Do you know what made you so restless? Was it the search for some roots or for some answers?

MG: I don't know, It's easier to keep running than to stay in one place when you have demons that don't want to settle down. Movement seems to help.

M-C: What do you see as some of the challenges of staying?

MG: Well, I have to change, and change is never easy. It's a challenge to change the way that I deal with things and to fundamentally change. And boy if you could figure that out and flip a switch wouldn't you make some money!

M-C: You're touring The Foundling until January; are you going to sit with that for a little while after the tour is over?

MG: No, we're working on this album. I haven't written any new songs since it came out and I'm looking at my guitar and thinking, hmmm. But I'm not quite there yet, I've got another 4 or 5 months of this one before I settle down and write another one. And if it keeps going, I'll keep going with it. Each record has a life cycle of it's own. This is my 6th studio record and my 7th record. I have some experience now with them and I kind of know what to expect. Sometimes they get a second wind and I just go with it, and sometimes they don't. Each one has it's own personality and it's been a joy getting to know this one.

M-C: Do you spend more time writing than you do recording and producing?

MG: Oh yeah, absolutely...it takes a couple of years to write. I just have to sit in one place and do that work.

M-C: So you just let the records lead you?

MG: Oh they do lead me.

M-C: I'm still intrigued by the fact that your albums and songs are filled with such personal details of your life and that working through your experiences are such a huge part of your work. Most people compartmentalize their lives so that their work life and their emotional lives are so separate...

MG: From where I sit, doing that seems insane. But for everyone else, doing what I do seems insane. We all do what we gotta do to get through the day, I guess, and ultimately we're called to do certain things. To be honest, I'm just really well-suited to this. It's what I do best, to try to figure out spiritual and emotional situations and concepts and to do it in a way that has music behind it, and rhymes. I'm just well suited for it, it's the way my mind works.

M-C: A lot of people ask you about the sadness that is in your songs and you made a joke once about maybe writing a happy song one day. Is that something you consider doing?

MG: Maybe one day. I ultimately don't choose it. There's something in charge of what I do and I'm just trying to follow the muse's instructions.

M-C: You're on the road now until January and then what are your plans?



MG: I'm always out there working, it's what I want to do and I belong on stage singing my songs to people, it's what I love and it's what I was put here to do. No matter what, unless things dramatically change, it's what I want to be doing.

M-C: You've got three Canadian tour dates coming up, do you have any plans to make a few more stops in Canada?

MG: I sure would like to. It's always a challenge because to go from major city to major city and it involves a lot of flying and that gets really expensive. It's usually an east coast or west coast thing.

M-C: We'd love to have you back for a more dates here.

MG: I'd love to play Montreal.

M-C: My mom is back in Wolfville (Nova Scotia)...and you were there a couple years ago for the Deep Roots Festival.

MG: Yeah I loved it there.

M-C: I was telling her that I was going to interview you and she said loved your music - especially your song Mercy Now - and she asked me to put in request that you come back to East Coast soon.

MG: I love that! Cross-generational is good...tell her I'd love to go back.

Alt-country singer/songwriter Mary Gauthier exploded onto the scene in 1999 following her self-released sophomore effort, Drag Queens in Limousines. The album, which garnered her a Crossroads Silver Star and a four-star rating in Rolling Stone, had critics comparing her self-described "country noir" to the likes of Townes Van Zandt, Steve Earle, John Prine, and, not surprisingly, Lucinda Williams. The success of Drag Queens led to main-stage shows at festivals around the country and multiple tours in Europe. Embraced by critics, folkies, and No Depression fans alike, Gauthier's warmly candid treatment of her fringe-dwelling subjects rings true, as it never verges on sentimental; her characters' downtrodden lives are never coldly exploited. Instead, these are people she knows, who she met after dropping out of her Louisiana high school and stealing the family car at the age of 15, only to find herself in detox at 16 and jailed in Kansas City at 18. Her own wayward path led her to culinary school and, eventually, she opened a successful restaurant in Boston's Back Bay -- Dixie Kitchen -- which she sold after her music career started to take off. Filth & Fire, Gauthier's third album, was produced by former Lucinda Williams sidekick Gurf Morlix and released in July 2002. Mercy Now was issued in 2005 by Lost Highway, followed by the Joe Henry-produced Between Daylight and Dark in 2007. Gauthier next released the autobiographical The Foundling, produced by Mike Timmons of the Cowboy Junkies, on Razor & Tie Records in 2010. <http://www.marygauthier.com>