



BETTER TOGETHER IN ACTION

ORGANIZATIONS WORKING TO INTEGRATE RACIAL JUSTICE AND LGBT ISSUES

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INTRODUCTION

Many organizations working on racial equity also engage in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) advocacy, as the Applied Research Center (ARC) found in our 2010 report “Better Together”.¹ However, these examples are not highly visible and are often underresourced. As a result, misperceptions about the potential linkages between racial and LGBT justice flourish, including assumptions that few people of color identify as LGBT or that people of color are more homophobic than whites.

The three case studies in this report challenge these assumptions. Each illustrates how the recommendations we outlined in the 2010 Better Together report can strengthen both movements for racial justice and LGBT equity. These recommendations were:

- 1 Increase support for strategic political analysis that links racial justice and LGBT equity
- 2 Invest in tools that expand beyond specific policy fights like marriage equality and Don't Ask, Don't Tell to engage long-term capacity development and coalition building
- 3 Develop LGBT leaders of color
- 4 Expand media visibility and communications capacity of LGBT people of color and those working at the intersection of race and sexuality

The experiences of the South Asian Network (SAN), Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment (FIERCE), and Southerners On New Ground (SONG) embody two models of possible collaborations between racial and LGBT justice movements: on the one hand, there is the story of a racial justice organization (SAN) that engages in LGBT advocacy; on the other hand, groups like SONG and FIERCE are led by LGBT leaders of color who advocate broadly for social and economic issues, in addition to equity for queer and transgender people. These groups strengthen their missions by combining both intersectional analysis and strategic action on race, class and sexuality.

Our first case study focuses on SAN, a community-based organization that provides social services to the population of South Asian immigrants in the Long Beach area of California. Since 2008, SAN has actively collaborated with Satrang, a LGBT South Asian organization, to create a safe, welcoming space for queer and transgender identified community members. This profile tells the story of the partnership between the two organizations, as well as the process of internal education within SAN, through the biographies of SAN organizer Joyti Chand, Satrang leader Salman Husainy, and SAN founder Hamid Khan.

The second case study on FIERCE and the third case study on SONG embody how LGBT leaders of color can bring an intersectional analysis to bear on multiple issue areas. FIERCE was created by young LGBT activists who were pushed out of waterfront piers by the forces of gentrification in New York. The LGBT youth fought back, consolidating a base of active leaders who asserted their right to public space. We hear from the cofounders of FIERCE, Jesse Ehrensaft-Hawley and Krystal Portalain, about the group's inception in the context of racial and sexual profiling by the New York police. FIERCE members also helped to create the national network for affordable housing, Right to the City, which former FIERCE leader Rickke Mananzala tells us is elevating the leadership of LGBT youth of color among a broader community.

The last example is rooted in the South, as is the organization SONG and its leaders. This case study looks at the evolution of the organization through the lives of three of its leaders: Mandy Carter, an elder Black woman who was politicized by the Quakers; Paulina Helm-Hernandez, a child of Latino farmworkers, who presently codirects the organization; and Sendolo Diamanah, a transplant to the South from the urban North.

SOUTH ASIAN NETWORK (SAN)

South Asian Network (SAN), a community-based organization in Artesia, California, started to broaden their civil rights campaign to encompass queer and transgender rights organizing in the political context of Sept. 11. The aftermath of the terrorist attack intensified and broadened pre-existing issues of racial profiling and racism in the United States for South Asians, whether Indian or Pakistani, Hindu or Muslim, middle or working class. All South Asians were seen thereafter through a similar lens—as outsiders, as potential terrorists, as threats to national security—and many organizers increased their calls for solidarity both across and within communities.

A five-block stretch of Pioneer Boulevard in Artesia, California is known as “Little India.” Signs advertise eyebrow threading for \$5.95 at Sona Chaandi. Chaat and various small plate appetizers are sold at Surati Farsan Mart. Kurtis with intricate patterns line the sales rack outside of Miss India Fashion. Southern California is home to one of the biggest South Asian communities in the United States. About 115,000 lived in Los Angeles County in 2010, and the population grew 36.5 percent between the 2000 and 2010 Census.

“South Asian” is a political term, constructed by students of South Asian descent who were in search of a collective identity on college campuses in the 1980s.¹ The term itself is used to refer to populations from seven countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Although in their home countries, people identify themselves by their individual ethnicity or culture, South Asians are all racialized as “brown” in the U.S.

“WORKING CLASS SOUTH ASIANS, IN PARTICULAR, ALREADY DEALT WITH RACISM AND HATRED IN THE SYSTEM. BUT, POST-9/11, EVERYONE WAS TARGETED.”
—JOYTI CHAND

FOUR MAJOR WAVES OF SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRATION

The political term *South Asian* obscures the religious, socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic differences within the racial category. One’s economic class is strongly tied to when one immigrated to the U.S. and under what circumstances. There have been four major waves of South Asian immigration since World War II⁴:

- 1 A provision of the 1965 Immigration Act welcomed trained professionals with special skills, such as doctors, engineers and scientists from India.
- 2 In the 1980s, a family reunification scheme brought in immigrants who didn’t have the same education or professional training as the first wave.
- 3 In the 1990s, a large number of software programmers and engineers from South Asia immigrated to the U.S. to fulfill labor demands of the dot-com economy.
- 4 The most recent wave of immigrants has entered the U.S. through the Green Card Lottery program, which was established as part of the 1996 Immigration Act. Most of the immigrants who land in Southern California originate from Nepal, don’t speak English and lack marketable job skills.⁵ Many find work in low-wage, service occupations.⁶

Gayatri Gopinath, queer studies scholar, wrote that it was the first wave of immigrants—the white-collar professional class from India—that defined the dominant identity of the South Asian diaspora in the U.S.⁷ That identity is patriarchal, heterosexual and filled with national and ethnic pride. This monolithic vision often excludes women, queers and the working class.

Every year for the past decade, the conflict between this exclusionary identity and the diversity of who actually comprises the South Asian community erupts around the India Day Parade in New York. Since the early 1990s, queer South Asian groups, such as the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA), were barred from marching in the day's festivities by a group of Indian immigrant businessmen who operate under the Federation of Indian Associations (FIA). Also barred was an advocacy group for victims of domestic violence, Sakhi for South Asian Women.

Federation officials were quoted by newspapers as saying that neither of these groups represents specific Indian traditions or the country's independence.⁸ "We are here celebrating the 50th anniversary of India's independence," Federation president Kanu Chauhan told *The New York Times* in 1997. "There are people wasting time asking about these gays and lesbians."⁹

"A lot of [South Asians] are not talking about violence within the community [or] domestic violence; [they are] silent about LGBT," explained Joyti Chand, a civil rights organizer at SAN. That was all about to change post-September 11 for the South Asian community in Southern Los Angeles County. According to Hamid Khan, former executive director of SAN, "9/11 was an opportunity for us to challenge our model minority status."¹⁰

JOYTI CHAND

In 2008, Joyti Chand began work as the Civil Rights Unit Associate Coordinator at SAN, about six years after joining the staff as a 20-year old, fresh out of school. Her initial work at SAN consisted primarily of community outreach on issues ranging from HIV, tobacco, hate crimes discrimination and police brutality. Prior to that, most of her political consciousness was centered around her own family and immigrant experience. Her grandfather was politically active and always talked about social justice during her formative years on Fiji Island, where she says she was very sensitive to seeing how different people are treated differently. At age seven, she left the island with her family for the United States, settling after a few months in Englewood, New Jersey.

In New Jersey, Joyti noticed injustice early on, watching her family navigate racism in the immigration system and surrounded as she was by constant police violence against Blacks in her adopted nation. For example, local headlines from that time were dominated by cases such as that of the police murder of 16-year old Black youth Phillip Pannell.¹¹ A resident called the police, complaining about a gathering of young people, one of which allegedly had a gun. The cops stopped Pannell and his friends on the street. The white officer, Gary Spath, shot Pannell in the back, but was acquitted two years later.¹² Pannell's death was not an isolated case—between 1990 and 1995, at least one Black youth was killed by a white cop in New Jersey every year.¹³

"Many people don't grow up thinking they can talk about all of these things," said Joyti. "It's a process from when you are a child to start thinking about things—not just sexuality, but also other things like police brutality—and go through your own process of coming out. Internally, we always talk about coming out at SAN—not just saying you're gay, but you're coming out on religion, or state violence, or mental health."

Sept. 11 intensified the rest of the South Asian community's exposure to the racialized violence of the criminal justice system. "When September 11 happened, my first reaction was ... now many more middle-class South Asians have to deal with what working-class South Asians have been facing daily: racism and hatred in the system," recalled Joyti.¹⁴

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“Suddenly everyone was targeted.” Under then-Attorney General John Ashcroft, for example, the Special Registrations program specifically targeted men of majority-Muslim countries, including many of South Asian descent.¹⁵ Almost 83,000 men complied with the special registration policies, 13,000 of whom were deported, tearing apart families and communities.¹⁶ FBI and immigration officers showed up at a home or workplace, sometimes in the middle of the night, to arrest a father, mother or child—without explanation. Over 1,000 people were picked up and detained in the New York and New Jersey areas.¹⁷ As a result, many South Asian families left the neighborhoods that were previously considered safe and attractive places to settle.

September 11 was a turning point in how receptive the established South Asian community was to civil rights issues, given the wide-scale racial profiling of their community. Joyti recollected that SAN had three programmatic areas: AWAZ Voices Against Violence, Community Health Action Initiative (CHAI), and Civil Rights Unit (CRU). But the South Asian community was reluctant to admit that domestic violence or queer and transgender identified individuals were among their own family, friends and networks.

Joyti said:

We wanted to provide a safe space in our town halls, but we didn’t get stuck in the victim lens. It was very important to take the hostile conditions and make them bigger, to challenge people. If you think this is happening now all of a sudden, think about the fact that we have LGBTQ people who are constantly in a hostile environment, who are constantly being silenced because of who they are. ... People have always been under attack, and it’s important to make connections.¹⁸ That was the foundation, the contradiction within the organization. We say we’re a social justice organization, and we try to do all this intersectional stuff, but we were not intentionally building it into the work. Unless we had some basic understanding of queer and transgender issues or created a safe space, we can’t go out and expect the community members to come here. If they do, they won’t feel safe in this space, and that’s counter to the work that we were trying to do.

In 2002, a queer South Asian advocacy organization, Satrang, had been using office space at SAN with Executive Director Hamid Khan’s support for about five or six years. “But that didn’t necessarily mean that people on SAN staff understood [LGBTQ rights] as a human rights issue.” Nor did it mean that Satrang members saw SAN as a truly safe space. Joyti sensed discomfort among the staff at SAN. “There’s a lot of silence around LGBTQ issues in the South Asian community. I didn’t grow up with queer or trans folks, [and SAN staff] didn’t have many interactions with queer and transgender people.” Although SAN’s work included domestic violence counseling and assisting families to access healthcare, there was no internal analysis of how this work intersects with the queer and transgender South Asian community.

“I think that’s what Hamid was getting to. There was space, but [collaboration] was really an effort to move the work forward.” And as Joyti recalls, leadership at both organizations mutually reached out to each other.¹⁹

SALMAN HUSAINY

Salman Husainy emigrated with his family from Karachi, Pakistan, when he was 13 years old, landing in Southern California. As a college student at UC Irvine, he joined a gay and lesbian support group. This was the first time he was away from home, and like many young adults, he explored his sexuality. Salman grew up in a small town in central California, where there were no queer role models, no clubs or afterschool groups, and no bars or clubs. At that point, Salman was not out to his family, only to the LGBT group on campus. But no other members seemed like him. “I thought I was the only queer South Asian Muslim person,” Salman recalled, “which was incredibly isolating for me.”

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SAN-SATRANG POLITICAL EDUCATION

A queer advisory committee, comprised of SAN and Satrang staff, facilitated two years of intensive staff training on homophobia and transphobia. The framework of the training was based on a human rights perspective. The first few sessions were just conversations, where participants had the chance to share the stereotypes that they held. Apprehension and anxiety resulted. The facilitators responded with great care and compassion, using the discomfort experienced by the staff as a way to push them further in their political growth.

After graduating, Salman searched online for South Asian and Muslim LGBT support groups. He found Trikone's website, based in San Francisco, and a staff person put him in contact with a network of queer and transgender South Asians in the Los Angeles area. The community held monthly potlucks, with the participants growing from 50 to 100. Salman and the other organizers identified a core group of individuals who wanted to create a more structured organization that would go beyond just facilitating supportive potluck gatherings and would work towards more visibility for the queer and transgender South Asian community. This led to the establishment of Trikone-LA, later renamed Satrang, which signifies the seven colors of the rainbow.²⁰

When Satrang first reached out to SAN, the latter was conceived by Satrang members as a "mainstream organization," a straight space. After a year of internal staff development for SAN, overseen by a joint advisory committee of SAN and Satrang representatives, both organizations developed a comfort and affinity with each other. These were mandatory trainings for the SAN staff who used a human rights perspective to talk about what it meant to be queer.

"There was resistance from both sides: What does it mean for us South Asian queers to be in this South Asian mainstream open space? For me, personally, does it mean that now I'll be outed to the South Asian community?" asked Salman. "I experienced a lot of personal uncertainty: Am I ready for this? I'm out to my family, but now perhaps my extended family will find out. Is it really safe? But at the end, I knew that collaboration was necessary to outreach and raise the visibility of our community within a South Asian context."

One of the first tasks that SAN and Satrang decided to tackle together was a community needs assessment survey, to document the breadth of the LGBT community among South Asians and to highlight issues they faced. The main issues that the report focused on were what types of health, wellness and support services queer South Asians had access to, and what were the barriers to access these types of services. Furthermore, SAN and Satrang wanted to document the experiences of being an LGBT-identified individual in the South Asian community. The survey included questions about how family, culture and homophobia impacted their health and well-being.

Almost 100 South Asians who identified as LGBT filled out a survey. The survey was filled out anonymously online or in paper form. It was promoted through electronic mailing lists, newspaper ads, and outreach in LGBT spaces. Fliers promoting the survey were distributed at South Asian festivals, to capture the population that may not frequent explicitly queer spaces. More than half of the respondents identified as gay men, between the ages of 26 and 40, and first-generation immigrants hailing from India.

Other findings included:

- LGBT individuals were more likely to be out to their friends than to their healthcare providers and immediate family. They were less likely to be out to their ethnic, religious or spiritual community and extended family.
- Alienation was a pervasive feeling among the respondents—one in four felt alienated from the broader South Asian community.
- Over three-quarters of respondents experienced homo/trans/bi-phobia—seven out of 10 had these experiences within the South Asian community.
- Seventy-seven percent were subjected to racism in the mainstream U.S. society—56% felt it within the LGBT community.
- An overwhelming 90 percent of respondents had mental health issues. Almost half reported having suicidal thoughts, but didn't seek help because of shame or embarrassment.
- When help was sought in a healthcare setting, almost a quarter of the respondents experienced discrimination because of their sexual orientation, race or immigration status, or gender nonconformity.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR INFRASTRUCTURE BUILDING (EXCERPT FROM COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT)²¹

The experience of the research process highlights how the act of conducting research may bring about change not only in community awareness but also in community infrastructure building. The success of the research process should be attributed to the relationship between SAN and Satrang, which existed long before the research project. The research process highlights the importance of long-term relationship building between LGBTIQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and Questioning] organizations and non-orientation-specific allies, especially one whose credibility and history in the broader community makes it an ideal messenger for community education on LGBTIQ issues. Many SAN staff had also taken the knowledge gained from this process and educated their own families and friends.

Furthermore, through this process, SAN incorporated LGBTIQ issues in its other work, including its current campaign to organize taxi drivers[sic]. Organizers and workers in this campaign recognized the deep homophobia that existed in their community and included support for LGBTIQ individuals as part of the values in their work, including solidarity work with LGBTIQ South Asians on the basis of human rights and civil liberties. This was possible in part due to the continuing collaboration between Satrang and SAN and SAN's own evolution of understanding of LGBTIQ South Asian issues.

For Satrang, the research process had increased its exposure to and participation in the broader South Asian as well as Asian and Pacific Islander communities. Satrang and SAN members presented the research project at conferences reaching beyond the LGBTIQ community, such as the South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT) and the Asian Pacific American Community Research Roundtable. Satrang volunteers gained experience in doing outreach and being out in their community. As a result, some Satrang volunteers have become more involved in the functioning of the organization. The research process also allowed Satrang to learn from larger or more sophisticated organizations (i.e. SAN and SSG), after which Satrang could model itself. Satrang's next strategic plan might include expanding its circle of community partners, using this collaboration model. Partly as a result of collaboration with SAN, Satrang renewed its commitment to diversify its membership to include more low-income LGBTIQ South Asians. Primarily a social support organization, the research process had politicized its membership through the training of volunteers as community outreach workers as well as the inclusion of Satrang membership in the interpretation of research findings.

The SAN-Satrang report made a number of recommendations, focused on providing targeted health services—both physical and, equally importantly, mental health services—to LGBT-identified South Asians. Across all gender, age, educational attainment, income and immigration levels, respondents to the survey reported feeling the brunt of social pressures. Because of this, many respondents said they didn't seek out care for fear of shame or embarrassment. Many also felt their status as a double minority: as an LGBT person in a South Asian setting or person of color in an LGBT space. Outreach and education based on a civil rights framework were recommended as strategies to equip LGBT individuals to both identify and report discrimination as well as to promote this issue among the South Asian community.

Salman is now out to his family and his extended community. However, he still wishes that more role models were available to him in his earlier years. "I wish I had known someone who was queer and South Asian, so I could find support, so I wouldn't have felt so alone," he said. "When people are first coming out, it's empowering to know that I'm not the only one." He hopes that his continued work to build alliances with groups like SAN will further raise the visibility and awareness of LGBT individuals in the community. "The Satrang and SAN collaboration is a pioneering movement and a model that I hope is utilized and learned from; there is so much we can do together," Salman adds.

HAMID KHAN

Aside from the executive director, Hamid Khan, the other SAN staff members didn't have many interactions with queer and transgender people. Hamid grew up in Pakistan, where there was a culture of *hijras* or individuals who identify as a third sex, described as "neither male or female" by anthropologist Serena Nanda.²² Hijras include individuals born as males who undergo a ritual castration or who are intersexed or queer, as well as women who are unable to bear children. Hijras occupy a liminal role in Pakistani society—they are socially ostracized and typically make a living by performing at weddings or birth celebrations, begging or engaging in sex work.

Hamid recollected the impact of living among the hijras:

The presence of members of the [hijra] community made me aware of patriarchy in the society, as a young boy and the youngest born of a family of six. I became aware of how gender plays out, aware of privilege. I grew up in a lower-middle-class neighborhood, playing out in the streets most of the time, where there were young [hijras]. I was always intrigued by the sheer courage of the young [hijras] to navigate the streets...and impressed.

Fast-forward to 1979, when Hamid immigrated to the U.S. He had a background of youth and student organizing in Pakistan, and in the U.S., he participated in a rally at UCLA to protest against then-presidential candidate Ronald Reagan in 1979. Hamid became aware of race and racial identity for the first time, as a new immigrant. "Coming to the U.S., the first thing I became aware of is the color of my skin," he reflected. "Identity here is racialized—everyone is identified by their race, an intersection of race and national identity. You can be Italian and white. What does your race and identity mean in terms of the political economic structure? Here in the U.S., I am reminded of my otherness."

Hamid's sense of being excluded translated into his activism, which led to the creation of SAN. The organization recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary.²³ In its first four years, SAN organized townhall meetings and community listening sessions as an unincorporated group. According to Hamid, this was crucial in order to understand what issues the South Asian community living in South Los Angeles was engaged in: immigration, healthcare, or hate crimes. Nonprofit status wasn't secured for SAN until four years into the work, and the first paid staff person was hired six years after SAN's inception. SAN's approach is multi-layered, engaging the individual in self-reflection as well as external action.

"WE ENGAGE IN MULTIPLE STRATEGIES TOWARDS RACIAL JUSTICE, AN APPROACH [THAT COMBINES] HOW THE EXTERNAL AFFECTS THE COMMUNITY IN TERMS OF POLICYMAKING, HOW THE 'OTHER' IS CONSTRUCTED IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DOMAIN, OR HOW PEOPLE ARE SYSTEMATICALLY DENIED ACCESS. THE KEY PIECE IS TO BE INTERNALLY SELF-REFLECTIVE ABOUT THE BUY-IN OF YOUR OWN SENSE OF INFERIORITY, HAVING BEEN A MEMBER OF A GROUP THAT WAS COLONIZED FOR 150 YEARS."

—HAMID KHAN²⁴

Hamid said: “We engage in multiple strategies towards racial justice, an approach [that combines] how the external affects the community in terms of policymaking, how the ‘other’ is constructed in the public and private domain, or how people are systematically denied access,” Hamid explained. “The key piece is to be internally self-reflective about the buy-in of your own sense of inferiority, having been a member of a group that was colonized for 150 years. What was the message that led to people perceiving their own inferiority? And, to also identify and celebrate movements of resistance, of how people resisted oppression. This is a multi-layered approach, from the self and building outwards from that. How do we regain our dignity?”

Hamid created opportunities for Joyti Chand to take leadership in developing an internal analysis and strategy and for SAN staff to incorporate gender and sexuality into their daily work. Joyti pushed for SAN to engage further in LGBT rights organizing. She considered Hamid an ally, and people at SAN looked up to him as a leader and a visionary. His support and active partnership was crucial in getting SAN’s board to approve the incorporation of queer and transgender analysis. Joyti and Hamid developed an “active partnership,” beyond mentoring, where they shared experiences, talked through issues and developed a shared analysis and action plan.

SAN persevered in the work, despite the lack of funding. When Hamid was the executive director, he was always aware of resources and the capacities of his staff. For its first six years, SAN did all of its work unfunded—but regardless of whether or not its projects were funded, the political and social necessity of working on projects was ingrained in SAN’s DNA. “The restraints of being part of the non-profit industrial complex as an executive director, is that you have to be creative with funding,” explained Hamid. “Workers’ rights work is not the only thing that defines us, neither is healthcare. We don’t operate in siloes: you could be a woman, queer, evicted, a migrant worker, all these are happening at the same time. So, our response needs to be intersectional, as well.”

CONCLUSION

Since the community needs assessment report was released in 2007, SAN and Satrang have continued to work together, letting the LGBT community know about the social services available through SAN, as well as challenging Satrang—mostly middle class members—to serve low-income South Asians. But the work is also about visibility and doing multi-issue organizing, in Joyti’s view.²⁵ The results of the report were surprising to many in the community. “I didn’t know that such a high percentage of queer South Asians didn’t have access to healthcare and mental health; how many people were isolated and suffered from depression, leading double lives,” Salman Husainy said. “A lot of people don’t have access, especially monolingual South Asians who are new immigrants and support families.”

SAN and Satrang confronted hatred when trying to publicize the community needs assessment and its results in local newspapers. The *India Post* editor refused to publish advertisements, writing in an e-mail addressed to Joyti that “[M]arriage is a union between a man and a woman. [T]his is the social order that the mammals have observed. Have you ever heard of Hommo [sic] Horses or Lesbien [sic] Cows. Yes you will misunderstand my views as hate language...Why should anybody demand special services for his/her bedroom preferennces [sic].” The editor continued by saying, “You will agree with my contention that we have no place for faggots/homos/fairies/pansies/and finaly [sic] Bondues.”²⁶

Hamid issued a strongly worded reproach to the *India Post* editor. Calling it out explicitly as “hate speech,” he wrote: “We will not accept and tolerate such de-humanization of people who are our fellow community members, family, friends, neighbors and colleagues regardless of their sexual orientation. It has even a further level of unacceptability especially coming from a person who is a journalist for a widely read community newspaper—India Post.”²⁷ SAN filed an official complaint with the Los Angeles County Human Rights Commission.

“RACIAL JUSTICE AND QUEER IDENTITY ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE; THEY ARE INTERSECTIONAL IN NATURE, AND VERY MUCH A PART OF EACH OTHER. HOW DOES IT CREATE MULTIPLE JEOPARDIES FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR WHO IDENTIFY AS QUEER OR TRANS? THIS CREATES MULTIPLE LAYERS OF CHALLENGES, NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE, BUT PART OF OUR DAILY LIFE.”
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The editor responded with an apology, but SAN and Satrang continue to hold the editor and the newspaper accountable. “This wouldn’t be possible if we didn’t work to build trust,” reflected Salman. “It was a joint effort and collaboration.”

“Racial justice and queer identity are not mutually exclusive; they are intersectional in nature, and very much a part of each other,” said Hamid. “How does it create multiple jeopardies for people of color who identify as queer or trans? This creates multiple layers of challenges, not mutually exclusive, but part of our daily life.”

The work continues to today, mostly through a committee made up of SAN and Satrang staff and members. Recently, the committee sponsored a *mela* in the SAN offices—a festival with music, with queer performances. Satrang members were invited and issues faced by LGBT community members were discussed. “That was really big for us... it really opened up the relationship more,” Joyti remembered. “The mela was a great moment because queer identity was being celebrated so openly and SAN played a significant role in getting there over the many years,” added Hamid.²⁸ “The mela was a culmination and a gratitude to all those who had contributed towards SAN’s transformation and courage from its beginnings.”

The report was released on National Coming Out Day. SAN and Satrang staff and members marched in procession down Pioneer Boulevard, the heart of Little India, holding signs that read “We’re out, We’re queer, Out on Pioneer” and “South Asian Queer and Proud,” and passing out flyers. This is now an annual observance that SAN and Satrang do jointly every year on National Coming Out Day. “I never in my wildest dreams thought Satrang would be here,” said Salman. “It was amazing, amazing visibility...Some people said, ‘No, don’t do this... We need to be quiet and offer support... Business people will just laugh at you.’ But, the store owners just waved and smiled at us. It was so empowering for both communities, for SAN and Satrang to be there together.”

Now, the queer community utilizes the services that SAN provides. This didn’t happen prior to 2006, Joyti recalls, but now LGBT individuals and families come to the SAN offices for help with immigration applications, worker issues, healthcare access and family counseling. In the past year, several families have attended counseling when the parents discovered their child was gay. In one case, according to Joyti, the child was in his 30s. (It’s common in the South Asian community for children to live at home until marriage.) His parents found out on the Internet that he was queer, so they locked him up at home, only allowing him to go out in order to go to work.

Satrang has also referred immigration cases to SAN. One recent case involved a queer man who was thrown out by his family and applied for asylum. “How wonderful for a parent to go to a mainstream South Asian space and get counseling on their queer child,” Salman said. “The parent thinks: ‘I want to hear from someone who’s South Asian.’ There’s a validation knowing that the South Asian organization [SAN] is talking about what it is to be queer.”

FABULOUS INDEPENDENT EDUCATED RADICALS FOR COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT (FIERCE)



Sunsets on the West Side Piers in New York City are spectacular. Lovers clasp each others' waists, joggers push baby carriages, and teams of cyclists go up and down the west side of Manhattan at dusk. On one such evening in late summer of 2009, a group of youth of color clustered together in a park along the river.¹ Wooden posts, the remnants of these once lively docks, jutted out of the greenish river water. There was music, vibrant clothing, and young people in drag competing in a fashion show, also known as a ballroom competition.²

The West Side space, however, has no history of welcoming gender and racial diversity and wasn't always available to LGBT youth of color. FIERCE (Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment) has battled for more than ten years to claim this public space as their own.

Once an active and thriving port when goods were moved up and down the Hudson River, the abandoned shipping sites at the edge of the city were largely ignored by developers during most of the late 20th century. The defunct piers in the 1970s became places for the socially marginalized, people who have been literally pushed to the city's periphery.³ Homeless people set up encampments along the river, looking out to New Jersey, and the stretch of wasteland became a place for gay men, mostly white, to socialize. With the burgeoning ballroom scene that emerged in the 1960s in Harlem, word circulated at these uptown gatherings that the piers were a place to go and find community.⁴ Soon, LGBT people of color, including children whose parents had thrown them out of their homes for their gender and sexual identity, also found a welcoming community space on the piers.

FIERCE was founded by this nascent community of young LGBT people and now serves as a model LGBT organization that incorporates an intersectional analysis around race, gender, sexuality, and class in its organizing. FIERCE's work also marks a fundamental shift in how this part of the LGBT liberation movement frames its battles— in asserting the right to public space, the organization made common cause with other activists who refused to be displaced during the gentrification of the West Side in the mid-2000s. This journey led LGBT youth to become leaders in a national dialogue on who has the “right to the city.”

JESSE EHRENSAFT-HAWLEY

Jesse Ehrensaft-Hawley was born to a progressive family in Berkeley, California; his grandparents were tenant organizers. During college, he spent a semester in New York, where he did an internship at the Anti-Violence Project (AVP) for lesbians and gay men. He then got a job with Project Reach, a summer political education school for youth. It was in that summer program that the five would-be FIERCE cofounders connected.⁵ At age 22, Jesse was the eldest of the group.

The cofounders identified an important gap in the city's social justice landscape—base-building organizations that activated and mobilized LGBT youth of color, and gave them a conduit for action. A plethora of social service organizations offered services and resources to LGBT youth, but none addressed their need for aggregating power to change the structural underpinnings of the situation. Groups like AVP served LGBT people of color, but didn't focus specifically on the needs of youth. Concurrently, many LGBT youth of color were involved in racial justice organizations, working on issues of police violence.

"FIERCE was founded on the idea of being a multi-issue organization that organizes at the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and age. We also saw ourselves as being part of a movement, an insurgent youth-led racial justice movement, which was also multi-issue," recalled Jesse. "Different groups, such as the Coalition Against Police Brutality (which was comprised of the Justice Committee, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the Audre Lorde Project, CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, Youth Force, and SLAM! or the Student Liberation Action Movement!), provided us with the political environment, to raise our consciousness and support us in launching our own campaigns."

FIERCE was first hosted at a drop-in center named the Neutral Zone that mostly served homeless LGBT youth. The new formation defined a political vision and analysis on the basis of lived experiences. "The community that we were based in was multiracial, multiclass—but, mostly in working class, low-income, and homeless communities—multigender, multisexuality," explained Jesse. "We developed a multi-issue analysis that resonated with our collective experience with the world(s) in which we were living." The first few months of FIERCE activity was spent in community building and consciousness raising.

One day, a young man arrived at a FIERCE meeting late and angry. He had been arrested the night before at the piers with other young people. This was not unusual—the police would often arrive and arrest 20 people at a time. The charges were often minor, such as smoking marijuana in public or panhandling, but with Mayor Giuliani's Quality of Life campaign (see Sidebar), the targets were broadened and the penalties deepened. An infraction that would garner a ticket, pre-campaign, would now mean spending a night in jail.

"THE COMMUNITY WE WERE IN WAS MULTIRACIAL AND MULTICLASS—MOSTLY WORKING CLASS AND HOMELESS—MULTIGENDER, MULTISEXUALITY. WE DEVELOPED A MULTI-ISSUE ANALYSIS THAT RESONATED WITH OUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE WORLD."
—JESSE EHRENSAFT-HAWLEY

MAYOR RUDOLPH GIULIANI'S QUALITY OF LIFE CAMPAIGN

In the mid-1990s, the mayor of New York City, Rudolph Giuliani, unveiled an anti-crime campaign that he called Quality of Life. It targeted and profiled low-income people of color, youth of color, and transgender people, among others. Without addressing why more than 100,000 people in the city were without homes or how he might be able to change that, he said, "You are not allowed to live on a street in a civilized city."

The campaign was premised on the "broken windows" theory that minor infractions are symptoms of and precursors to more serious crime. Therefore, law enforcement officers would heavily penalize small misdemeanors, such as jaywalking or street art. This also gave license for officers to interpret other actors as criminal, such as car window cleaners (aka squeegee men).

The predictable result, intended or not, was that people of color were more often caught up in the Giuliani dragnet than whites, and that was especially true for LGBT people of color. Because so many LGBT individuals faced social ostracization at home, thrown out of their homes by their parents at a young age, many turned to sex work as a way to survive. This made the entire LGBT community vulnerable to police scrutiny and speculation that they were engaged in prostitution, even when that wasn't their profession.

A 2005 Amnesty International report found that transgender individuals are subjected to intense gender profiling, stopped and questioned when walking out on the street, and when engaged in daily activities such as walking the dog or shopping.⁶ A police official of the Sixth Precinct in Manhattan, which encompasses the West Village and West Side Piers, told report authors that all prostitutes arrested in the precinct were transgender people.

Catalyzed by one member's anger, the group discussed how to channel that into an organizing strategy. The members decided to bring a VHS video camera down to the piers to ask youth about their experiences with the police. This activity would be both documentation of the increased surveillance and targeting of LGBT youth of color, and a way to start conversations with stakeholders to build a base.

Armed with a camcorder, FIERCE members began the interviews. The result, almost two years later, was *Fenced Out*, a documentary about LGBT youth of color's experiences with racial and sexual targeting and arrests at the piers area.⁷ In addition, FIERCE developed a survey to assess young people's experiences with police profiling. Anonymous surveys were distributed and collected at the piers area, as well as in Midtown South, another area heavily policed because of the community of transgender sex workers there. The findings confirmed members' experiences: there was a pattern of racial, gender, and sexual profiling on the part of the police department, hurting in particular the LGBT youth of color.

"The *Fenced Out* film was hugely crystallizing in terms of our momentum in establishing leadership beyond just the cofounders, because the filmmakers became the next group of leaders, who in turn used the film as an organizing tool to recruit and develop the next generation of members and leaders" explained Jesse. "Working on the film also created really strong ties between youth and the elders we interviewed. The elders became a part of the filming process, and ultimately these intergenerational relationships became a critical part of the organization." Sylvia Rivera, a pioneer for transgender rights, invited five of the FIERCE filmmakers, who took to calling her Mom, to live with her. Other elders featured in the documentary also became supporters of FIERCE, including Bob Kohler, a veteran of the Stonewall uprisings.

KRYSTAL PORTALATIN

Krystal Portalatin was only 16 when she attended the same training at Project Reach that Jesse Ehrensaft-Hawley had been at. A second-generation Puerto Rican who grew up in Richmond Hills, Queens, Krystal attended a high school focused on grooming students for corporate careers. Through Reach, she was exposed to oppositional politics and critiques of capitalism, which left her hungry for more.

Krystal's political development was grounded in her participation in the battle for public space that grew out of FIERCE's work on *Fenced Out*. Initially, the focus had been on what happened to LGBT youth of color in the piers area, she recalled, rather than who controlled the space itself.

Youth gravitate to the West Side Piers, including FIERCE members, who spent time there socializing with friends after meetings. But, that all changed when the park was seen by real estate developers as a prize resource to raise surrounding property values. The LGBT youth of color who used that space as a gathering place were left out of the renovation plans. The public-private entity that was put in charge of the park erected a fence and imposed a curfew.

Kohler encouraged the members to attend community board meetings, where issues such as the treatment of homeless people and the redevelopment of the waterfront were discussed and decided upon. The community board also played an advisory role to the Hudson River Park Trust, an entity given control over the strip of land starting from 59th Street down to Battery Park City. FIERCE members began to understand the importance of the Hudson River Park Trust's role in deciding the fate of the piers area.

At first, their strategy for resisting the unfolding gentrification was unclear. FIERCE had a list of demands but no clear sense of who their targets were or what tactics to use. The demands they coalesced around were:

- ① Immediate moratorium on funding to the Sixth Precinct policing of the area.
- ② Reallocate monies spent on policing and incarcerating LGBT youth and homeless towards community-based social service programs in the West Village (see Sidebar on LGBT youth services for further explication).
- ③ End racial and gender profiling and police harassment by the Sixth Precinct and other police operations in the Village and on the piers.
- ④ End the recently imposed 1:00 am curfew on the piers.
- ⑤ Create a meaningful process for LGBT youth to provide input in the development of the pier.

However, reported Krystal, FIERCE members soon realized that the main issue was public space and access to it. "When we first started out, our concerns were with police violence and criminalization of LGBTQ youth of color," remembered Krystal. "But as we continued working on the documentary, it became obvious that the main issue was public space and gentrification—how racism and capitalism intersect in who has access to the piers." *Fenced Out* was completed in the late summer of 2001. The release was planned for the summer of 2002 to be conjoined with a political education and outreach effort. But two unexpected things happened that shortened the timeline: September 11 and the emergence of neighborhood activist Jessica Berk.

LGBT YOUTH SERVICES

FIERCE's demands for community-based social service programs in the West Village included:⁸

- Funding for a drop-in center for LGBTSTQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Transgender, or Queer] youth. Particularly given the recently imposed curfew, young people who spend time at the Piers consistently talk about the need for a well-resourced center that stays open 24 hours and is centrally located in the West Village. Currently, there is no such safe space for young people.
- Funding and support for safe, affordable housing for LGBTSTQ youth. Like all low-income communities, LGBTSTQ youth of color face a severe lack of affordable housing. Compounding this general problem is the specific crisis of disproportionate homelessness that LGBTSTQ youth face. And for many transgender youth (particularly those who are of color) rampant housing discrimination almost guarantees constant housing crises.
- Funding for education and employment programs for LGBTSTQ youth. Many of the youth who comprise the community at the pier dropped out of school due a combination of homophobic and transphobic violence in their schools and the overall epidemic of our deeply under-resourced public schools. Additionally job discrimination is prevalent against LGBTSTQ youth of color and homeless youth, and particularly transgender youth. Thus, many of the youth who are being displaced from the pier have few opportunities, outside of street economies, which put them at serious risk for a life in and out of the criminal justice system. The money spent on policing the community must be re-allocated to provide them an opportunity for a living wage.

Much has been written about September 11 and its pivotal role in shifting the country to the right, in terms of civil liberties and racial profiling. For FIERCE, September 11 gave new fuel to the racial and sexual profiling already in place. For months afterwards, both New York City police and federal officers set up roadblocks alongside the piers, justifying their presence by the terrorism alerts that were released with a frequency that kept residents constantly on edge and in fear. Surveillance increased overall across the city, as September 11 was used to curtail assembly in public spaces. Martin Manalansan described how the walkways along the West Side Highway were blocked by concrete plant holders, interspersed with police officers, whose numbers increased between 2 am and 5 am, to dispel gathering crowds of LGBT youth of color.⁹

Amid that backdrop, FIERCE members released *Fenced Out* in October 2001. They planned to launch a campaign in the summer of 2002, but that changed when an irate West Village resident named Jessica Berk started the organization Residents in Distress (RID). A *New York Times* article brought attention to RID's complaints about how their neighborhood "has been overrun by truculent bands of drug dealers and transvestite prostitutes...most of the young people who loiter in the area on weekend nights are both gay and black."¹⁰

Unwittingly, Berk and RID catalyzed FIERCE's public space campaign. The West Village neighbors sponsored a forum in February 2002 titled "Quality of Life in the West Village: Spiraling Out of Control?" with speakers such as Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly and Christine Quinn, then a member of the mayoral taskforce on police and community relations. The event was billed as an opportunity for residents to ask for *more* policing of their neighborhoods, to eliminate the "prostitution, drunkenness, lewdness, sex in public, urination" attributed to the LGBT youth of color by Berk and her neighbors. Instead, FIERCE mobilized over 200 supporters to attend and voice their opposition to added policing in the West Village, outnumbering residents.

CLEAN UP YOUR STREETS? WE ARE NOT TRASH!!!¹¹

FIERCE showed up at the Community Board meetings and police forums with several dozen pier kids, demanding to be heard and waving colorful hand-painted signs insisting on their equal claim to this space—“Whose Streets? Our Streets Too!”; “Clean Up Your Streets? We Are NOT Trash!!!”; “Whose Quality of Life?” That’s how they got labeled “rowdies.” The residents were enraged to find themselves matched in number at meetings meant to be a platform for their own complaints, and they railed at the idea of kids they considered to be outsiders presuming the right to speak at such official proceedings. When they weren’t called rowdies, they were shorthanded as “BBQs,” for non-Manhattan neighborhoods they hailed from—Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens. As one woman put it in a meeting recounted by the *Village Voice*: “Maybe there should be a way to say, ‘You’re not welcome here.’ The cops used to do that. They’d drive unwanted people to Jersey and dump them.”

RICKKE MANANZALA

One of the most important outcomes of FIERCE’s organized resistance to Residents in Distress was building its base and developing new leadership. “For most of the people involved in FIERCE, there’s a real personal draw for organizing,” said Rickke Mananzala, former Executive Director. Like many FIERCE members, Rickke lost support from his parents as a teenager, when they learned that he was queer. “When you don’t have family, you create new forms of support. It’s important to meet people facing similar life challenges. FIERCE offers a path for youth to move from isolation to empowerment.”

Rickke joined the FIERCE staff in 2004. As staff, he was assigned to the campaign for public space access in the West Side Piers and Village, which was ongoing. Over the next few years, FIERCE’s advocacy would generate some gains. The \$25,000 fee that the city demanded from mobile vans providing services to homeless youth was repealed, and the group defeated a proposal by neighborhood residents to the Community Board to establish a 10:00 p.m. curfew.¹² Rickke helped to create a new campaign to establish a 24-hour center for LGBT youth. In order to win a new center, FIERCE knew that they needed to garner support from some new and unlikely allies.

FIERCE forged a lot of alliances with LGBT service-based organizations. Rickke explained, “We were able to move a coalition of these service providers to see gentrification and attacks on public space as a public health issue.” In 1995, West Village residents successfully organized to remove the only 24-hour drop-in center for LGBTQ youth, because they considered it a blight to the neighborhood.¹³ “We proposed the creation of a hub for a variety of services at a youth center in the West Village because LGBTQ youth services were spread out all over the city, in some places where youth don’t feel comfortable going to,” Rickke said. “This was FIERCE’s argument – service organizations are actually less effective and reaching fewer people because young people are less likely to access services in neighborhoods they don’t feel safe in. The service organizations agreed.”

FIERCE crafted the “Our S.P.O.T. (Safe Place to Organize Together)” campaign starting in 2007 with a needs assessment of LGBT youth of color. Two hundred young people responded to the survey, sharing their desire for a centralized hub for the LGBT community in the West Village, where youth could obtain various services in one place. Many had to travel back and forth across the city to obtain services, going to one office in lower Manhattan to get on a housing wait-list, another one in the Bronx to get food, to Brooklyn for temporary housing, and to Queens for a support group. Meanwhile, FIERCE and their allies identified Pier 40—which contains 1.2 million square feet of space and spans 14 acres¹⁴, and which is currently in use as a parking facility and field for soccer and intramural teams—as a potential location for the community center. The infrastructure needed to be renovated, a cost that community residents and FIERCE proposed could be covered by parking revenue.

“IN ALL OF THESE STORIES FROM DIFFERENT CITIES, GENTRIFICATION ISN’T JUST AN ATTACK ON WHERE PEOPLE OF COLOR LIVE. IT’S ALSO AN ATTACK ON CULTURE, BECAUSE COMMUNITIES NEED SAFE PUBLIC SPACES TO CONNECT, CELEBRATE, AND THRIVE.”

—RICKKE MANANZALA

However, a global real estate development business had different plans for Pier 40. Steven M. Ross, CEO of The Related Companies, L.P. had dreams of building a \$626 million entertainment complex with spaces for the Tribeca Film Festival and Cirque du Soleil.¹⁵ The “Vegas on the Hudson,” as opponents coined the proposal, would attract 2.7 million visitors a year, with a 12-screen cinema, an 1,800-seat music hall, a 28,650-square-foot event space and glass-enclosed winter garden, as well as high-end boutique shops.

FIERCE wasn’t alone in opposing the development scheme. They found unlikely allies with “soccer moms” and “little leaguers” who wanted to preserve the green fields on the pier for children to play soccer and baseball.¹⁶ Together, FIERCE and local parents demonstrated against Ross’ proposal—holding signs that read “Soccer Moms and LGBTQ Youth, Unite!”—and successfully defeated the development, while garnering support from parents’ groups for the creation of an LGBT youth center on Pier 40. FIERCE launched the Our S.P.O.T. campaign (officially in 2008), to create a community center on Pier 40 that would serve LGBT youth. Unfortunately, the economy crashed later in the year, and the campaign was put on hold because development in the city stalled.

Contemporaneously, FIERCE also embarked on another endeavor—cofounding a national network named Right to the City, comprised of member-based organizations across the country collaborating on a national agenda on for how cities are shaped. FIERCE was invited by the conveners—including Gilda Haas of Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE), Gihan Perrera of Miami Workers Center, and Jon Liss of Virginia New Majority— to participate in the first convening held in Los Angeles because of their campaign for public space in the West Village. “Everyone was asking, ‘What’s happening in our cities?’” Rickke remembered. “Cities were rapidly changing; private profit through luxury development was coming at the expense of the common good.”

Most of the other organizations invited to the founding convention were focused on affordable housing, which made FIERCE unique in that they were LGBT youth of color focused on public space and policing. Rickke saw the strategic advantage in joining forces with housing advocates. It was a learning opportunity that would help FIERCE broaden their piers campaign. Members were familiar with police brutality and the privatization of public space, but other concepts, such as how to set up a land trust or community benefits agreement, were new. Equally important, the gathering was a teaching opportunity. FIERCE added an analysis around cultural preservation and access to public space that opened up new ways of thinking for the other members of Right to the City. For example, in a struggle to create affordable housing, FIERCE members reminded organizers to also consider the inclusion of vital public spaces where communities can gather.

“In all of these stories from different cities, gentrification isn’t just an attack on where people of color can live,” said Rickke. “It’s also an attack on culture, because communities need safe public spaces to connect, celebrate, and thrive.”

FIERCE recognized the initial Right to the City gathering as a political opportunity to broaden the movement around social justice. “We’re sending a message by joining the Right to the City to the network and the broader LGBTQ movement,” explained Rickke. “We’re an LGBTQ organization joining an alliance that’s not LGBTQ-specific. Racial and economic justice is central in the lives of LGBTQ people. Likewise, LGBTQ rights must be embraced in struggles for racial and economic justice. These values strengthen our movements.”

“RACIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE IS CENTRAL IN THE LIVES OF LGBTQ PEOPLE. LIKewise, LGBTQ RIGHTS MUST BE EMBRACED IN STRUGGLES FOR RACIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE. THESE VALUES STRENGTHEN OUR MOVEMENTS.”
—RICKKE MANANZALA

CONCLUSION

Today, FIERCE has 1,500 members between the ages of 13 and 24. In the decade and counting of its existence, FIERCE redefined who has the right to the city and provided a buffer against attempts to push LGBT youth of color further out to the extremities of New York City. Concretely, FIERCE has been successful in its advocacy for a post-midnight curfew on the Christopher Street pier and for access to portable toilets after 8:00 p.m., when the bathrooms are locked. They are working to have affordable food sold on the pier, instead of the expensive café and ice cream shop currently situated on the pier, which caters to wealthier customers. FIERCE is waging a campaign to find vendors who sell food that their members can afford and who will also employ LGBT youth of color.

In recent years, the economic downturn has not only impacted FIERCE's proposal for the Pier 40 development, it's also caused the city to cut back on services provided to LGBT youth. Many social service agencies have reduced their hours of operation or the number of youth they can see. This results in more LGBT youth of color going without services or resources. Fewer job opportunities are available now, even during the tenuous recovery, and there are even fewer opportunities available for youth of color. "Two things have happened," Krystal said, "Youth have to hustle more to get their needs met, first, and second, we're seeing more youth who are locked out of services, because of budget cuts. They come here, to FIERCE's offices, to hang out."

Like many grassroots organizations, FIERCE is exploring other ways in which members can sustain themselves and remain self-sufficient. One manifestation would be a requirement that food vendors on the pier employ LGBT youth of color. Not enough vendor bids came in to the city, so FIERCE is considering the creation of a worker-owned cooperative to put in a bid. Also, talks are in progress with allies to start a worker-owned retail store that would employ FIERCE members and provide an alternative source of revenue for the organization.

While the West Side piers have historically been the geographical focus for FIERCE, they are broadening their gaze to cover the West Village—the neighborhood alongside the waterfront. The Safe Lives Saves Lives campaign identifies local businesses as safe zones where LGBT youth could go to find safety when harassed. "Businesses often look at our youth in a certain way. They demonize or discriminate against them," said Krystal. FIERCE has canvassed various small business owners in the area to build the network as a string of safe zones. Each will advertise itself with a sign on the door, and the owners would undergo training on how to support a youth who's been harassed. "It's not about calling the cops," Krystal clarified, "but it's about knowing the alternatives and training the store owners to have sensitivity around the issues that the youth are facing."

Preserving the piers and surrounding neighborhoods as spaces where LGBT youth of color are welcomed and feel safe, free from harassment or discrimination, is important not only for the youth themselves, but also to preserve the culture and history of the area. "The West Village has been a place of sexual liberation and personal expression," said Krystal. "If residents and businesses want to keep it that way, they have to support the youth."

The power and significance of those spaces as places of safety, freedom, acceptance, and liberation benefit all communities of New York City, whether queer, straight, or transgender. "Sexuality needs to be incorporated into all lenses, even if your community isn't queer-identified—it can be liberating," Krystal stated. "Gender and sexuality is so policed, especially for women, whether queer-identified or straight. Young men are put into a box for being gender non-conforming. We all struggle under this machine."

"SEXUALITY NEEDS TO BE INCORPORATED INTO ALL LENSES, EVEN IF YOUR COMMUNITY ISN'T QUEER-IDENTIFIED—IT CAN BE LIBERATING... WE ALL STRUGGLE UNDER THIS MACHINE."
—KRystal PORTALATIN

SOUTHERNERS ON NEW GROUND (SONG)

For the past 19 years, Southerners On New Ground (SONG) has advocated for sexual politics and gender liberation in what many would describe as the most challenging, isolating region of the nation to do so. And perhaps more than any other, one question has guided the organization from its inception through to present day: “Are we about justice or just us?”

SONG’s tagline is “building a political home across race, class, culture, gender and sexuality,” and their efforts inhabit the intersections of race, class, and gender, factors that create our sense of self and others. The organization emphasizes transformation of both individuals and communities. Their website describes the context of their work as a “land thick with what came before us—colonization, slavery, Civil Rights Movement, migration for labor, traditions of struggle, resilience, and beauty.”

SONG was birthed in 1992, when, for the first time, a national and mainstream LGBT organization decided to hold their annual conference in a southern city—Durham, North Carolina. Calls came in from across the country with questions such as, “Is there an airport there?”, “Why are we having it in North Carolina, isn’t that where Jesse Helms is from?”, and “What are grits?” remembered Mandy Carter, one of SONG’s co-founders.

Six queer women came together to facilitate a workshop at the conference to address some of the misperceptions about the South.¹ Three were Black, and three were white, but none were deeply engaged in movements in which being part and/or advocating for the LGBT was the central frame. Mandy, for instance, organized against the Vietnam War with organizations such as the War Resisters League. Suzanne Pharr, another cofounder, worked to eradicate domestic violence. The workshop was a catalyst for the women, who realized that their separate work would be enhanced by linking their issues under the geographic umbrella of the South. Post-conference, this led to ongoing conversations and retreats, which culminated in the creation of SONG in 1993.

At the same time, larger political and economic trends were at play in the world that impacted the South in unique ways. Three trends in particular stood out for Mandy. The first was the North American Free Trade Agreement that had devastating economic consequences for the region, which was heavily invested in the textile industry. Post-NAFTA, many of the textile companies moved out of the USA to take advantage of lower wages and little or no opposition from organized labor. For the first time in Mandy’s memory, both Black and white workers were abandoned and in the same leaky boat.

The second trend was the influx of Latino workers and families seeking employment in agricultural labor as U.S. companies took over foreign land that had been used for family farming and drove up local prices for food and shelter. Faith-based organizations that tried to provide services to the nascent immigrant population emphasized the need for Black and Latino unity: “We can’t afford a racial divide, we need to form multiracial coalitions,” Mandy paraphrased the call. “SONG was right there at the table” helping to broker that connection, even though it wasn’t about queer liberation and gay rights.

“HERE [IN THE SOUTH], MOVEMENTS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN ORGANIZATIONS. THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT STARTED AND ENDED THEIR MEETINGS WITH A SONG. THAT’S PART OF THE CULTURE OF THE SOUTH.”

—MANDY CARTER

The last trend was a problem shared by people trying to make progressive change all over the country—the resistance that the six cofounders met when carrying forth this intersectional work. For instance, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee ran a campaign against the Mount Olive pickle company because of the working and living conditions experienced by the farmworkers. SONG was asked to help with outreach efforts, but when Mandy called a friend, the response was, “Pickles? What does that have to do with my gay rights? Call me back when you have something that relates.” Mandy recalled being stunned by the reaction, but she realized that the door her friend came through was gay pride, lesbian festivals, and women’s bookstores. Equity was defined based on gender identity and sexual liberation, whereas SONG’s work was about redefining equity to apply to all of us.

Queers and women continue to be oppressed in society at large, so it is not surprising that the same marginalization occurs within low-income communities of color. SONG stands at the intersections, doing the difficult work of translation and bridging, always with the spirit of healing and a belief in redemption.

MANDY CARTER

Mandy Carter was born in Albany, New York, in 1950. She lived in many places, including San Francisco, before moving to Durham, North Carolina. She found out, years later, that her mother’s family was from the Durham region. The youngest of three siblings, she was a newborn when her mother left the family. Mandy only has the vaguest recollection of her mother. The state’s child welfare agency took Mandy and her siblings from her father and placed them in an orphanage. Later, the siblings were separated and placed in foster homes.

Though she hated the foster home, Mandy doesn’t think of her years in the orphanage as a negative experience. It was there that she learned how to think collectively for the greater good. “I lived with 100 other kids. Everything was based on what was the most efficient thing to do—we went to school at the same time, ate at the same time. Everything was geared towards the greater number,” she reflected. “My mind instinctively thinks like an organizer, because I’m always thinking about the collective good, instead of just me and my. It’s not a sense, I don’t think, that most people have, unfortunately. Our culture is so geared towards individualism.”

When Mandy was in high school, a group of Quakers visited and taught a social studies class. They recommended that Mandy attend a summer camp for youth run by the American Friends Service Committee, which she did, setting herself on a path in antiwar activism. It was the 1960s, and the U.S. was heavily invested in militarism, abroad in Vietnam and at home in communities of color. Mandy’s first job out of school was at the War Resisters League, in the San Francisco office.

The word “queer” had only negative meaning in 1964, but by the time she moved to San Francisco, Mandy was out, identifying herself as a lesbian. She was not isolated in her workplace; the War Resisters League has a history of openly gay leaders such as Bayard Rustin and David McReynolds. Mandy witnessed the birth of the queer rights movement in San Francisco. She remembered when its nexus was the San Francisco Tavern Guild, created by LGBT owners of bars and nightclubs in response to harassment and discrimination experienced by their queer customers, as well as themselves. “When we had our first San Francisco pride marches, we had no more than 100 people,” Mandy recalled. “Now, it’s 1.4 million. I remember when Harvey Milk was just someone who owned a business on Castro Street...he helped us realize why we should care about City Hall, because our collective LGBTQ votes count.”

“SONG HAS ALWAYS SAID THE MOST IMPORTANT WORD IS AND. WE CAN DO MARRIAGE EQUALITY AND JOBS.”
—MANDY CARTER

After 13 years on the west coast, Mandy longed for the four seasons and wanted to move back east. She took a position with the Durham office of the War Resisters League and has lived in the South ever since. “Here, movements are more important than organizations,” explained Mandy. In particular, the Civil Rights Movement cast a long shadow, the effects of which are still seen to this day. “The Civil Rights Movement started and ended their meetings with a song. That’s part of the culture of the South. In other places, it’s about what’s on the agenda.”

Even when writing SONG’s mission statement, the six cofounders highlighted the role of culture. The style of organizing, Mandy described, is shaped by the geography—most of the region is rural, with little access to computers and the Internet. “We need to go to where people are and sit with them around a kitchen table,” said Mandy. “We ask folks, ‘Hi, who are you? What do you do? What are your issues?’ We have to go to where people are at and take the time to really listen.”

The South is a dynamic place, and its population demographics have been shifting in the past two generations. The Latino population in North Carolina has grown by 111% between 2000 and 2010, while the Black population increased modestly, in comparison, by 17%.² However, when Mandy gave a speech on NAFTA at the LGBT conference that led to SONG’s formation, she met with resistance. “Why are we talking about this?” she was asked. “What does this have to do with being gay?” The mainstream, primarily white LGBT movement was focused on two issues: marriage equality and “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” “But, what about ending the wars abroad?” Mandy asked, “What about jobs?” Mandy was frustrated at the barriers she was encountering when trying to concentrate on the intersections of these issues. She reported, “Seems that when the national [LGBT] leadership sits around and figures out its agenda, money doesn’t talk, it screams. Millions have been raised for marriage equality. As opposed to just how little is spent on campaigns for jobs and the passage of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). To me it is very unbalanced. SONG has always said the most important word is *and*. We can do marriage equality *and* jobs.”

Mandy believes that the race and gender of the LGBT movement leadership shaped its narrow priorities. Noting that by 2050, the USA will have a majority of people of color, Mandy said, “The push back that we’re getting is very interesting, not just from the predominantly white right, but also from the progressive movement that I think doesn’t necessarily know what to do with the ever shifting demographics that show that by 2050 this country will be majority people of color. And our largest state of California already is,” Mandy said. “I think that the leadership of the gay movement needs to take a long look at itself and ask why is it majority white? What’s up with that?”

The pale cast of the mainstream LGBT leaders led to racialized scapegoating of communities of color for homophobic legislation, such as Prop 8 in California. Mandy said. “I sat here in Durham, horrified at hearing the Black community being blamed for Prop 8 by the mainstream media. And, most disappointingly, by some in the LGBT community,” she remembered. “Did the white LGBTQ groups talk to the Black communities about what Prop 8 means? ‘No, Black people are already anti-gay, so we’re not going to bother.’ The white leaders didn’t blame the Mormons, the white right that flooded California with their millions in advertising, instead they blamed the Black community.”

Mandy asked, “Who was dealing with marriage equality before LGBTQ? Women and people of color. Marriage was not a great deal for women, and interracial marriage was illegal. Who was dealing with the military before LGBTQ? Women and people of color. Been there and done that. And, the question that I have for our LGBTQ community when it seems so singularly focused on only LGBTQ issues is ‘Are we about justice? Or, are we about just us?’”. The movement for LGBT rights is often characterized as the “new civil rights movement,” but for Mandy it is the continuation of the same struggle of equity for all.

“WHO WAS DEALING WITH MARRIAGE EQUALITY BEFORE LGBTQ? WOMEN AND PEOPLE OF COLOR. MARRIAGE WAS NOT A GREAT DEAL FOR WOMEN AND INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE WAS ILLEGAL.”
—MANDY CARTER

PAULINA HERNANDEZ

Paulina Hernandez, Co-Director of SONG, began the critical work of intersectional organizing and bridging very early in her life. Her parents owned a small business in Mexico, but when the local economy began to collapse under the weight of NAFTA's disastrous impacts, they joined the flood of immigrants to the U.S. Paulina was twelve when they immigrated to eastern North Carolina and became farmworkers. Although Paulina's father had a background in engineering, he had to take on other work to make ends meet, even as the family farmed cucumbers, sweet potatoes, and chiles.

Paulina began organizing in farms and agricultural spaces as a youth. She joined Student Action for Farmworkers (SAF), a program that advocates for a just agricultural and economic system, and provides peer support and resources to farmworkers' children. Through SAF, Paulina would meet with farmworker families and their children, and encourage them to enroll in college as a pathway to economic empowerment and justice. This was before mass mobilizations of undocumented students and predated the political pressure to create and maintain the DREAM ACT. As a middle schooler, Paulina remembers interfacing with Chicano college students, many of whom had a burgeoning political analysis tied to their racial and gender identities, and this helped to strengthen her politicization.

Paulina was also immersed in an activist orientation at home through her mother, who taught English as a Second Language classes and was involved in anti-domestic-violence work. As a youth, Paulina learned a lot about the interconnectedness of gender, power and violence, especially as they manifested in her Latino community.

When she was 15 years old, Paulina was introduced to the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee. She became involved in Highlander's youth programming efforts and eventually was hired to coordinate the Center's regional youth activism program. At Highlander, Paulina began a rigorous process of growth, learning and organizing, all under the dependable support and mentorship of Suzanne Pharr, who was then the director of Highlander and who later cofounded both SONG and the Women's Project in Arkansas. Suzanne was part of the LGBT community and deployed a clear intersectional framework for building equity. Although Paulina at this time was out and knew she was queer, it wasn't until she was surrounded by people at Highlander that she saw how movement building could be wholly inclusive of gender expression, sexuality, immigrant status, race and other intersecting identities.

Also embedded in Suzanne's and Highlander's approach was an understanding that focusing exclusively on separate issues and policies would not adequately equip the South to dismantle racism and classism. In order to effectively fight systemic oppressions, gender and sexuality could not just be add-ons; they had to be centrally integrated into the strategy.

Paulina explained, "To understand intersectionality is to be able to look at the interconnectedness of things that are critical to our survival and take a more holistic approach." SONG's core values, under Paulina's leadership, would eventually embody this holism. In organizing at the Highlander Center, Paulina learned that part of what makes homophobia and transphobia endemic is that people are unaware of how it relates to their lives, and so frequently organizing is about softening and unpacking the fear that straight and cisgender people [those whose bodies match society's idea of their gender, as opposed to transgender people] feel. She also saw the ways in which homophobia was used to create divisions between straight and queer women.

During her six year tenure at Highlander, Paulina worked to build Southern organizing strategy and racial justice capacity building from a regional perspective. She supported multiracial and autonomous youth of color organizing efforts and identified the best ways to build intersectional infrastructure in the South that would concretely and positively affect

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people's lives. In weaving together sexual and gender dynamics with the immigrant rights movement, she began to grow fertile ground for leadership building of LGBT youth of color. In looking back on her time as a youth organizer for immigrant rights and then as a staffer at Highlander, Paulina explained that her intersectional lens was solidified through practice—both action and reflection. “A lot of folks went to college to do advanced studies,” she said, “but I did that through organizing.”

In 2006, as Mandy was transitioning out of leadership at SONG, Paulina decided to apply for co-directorship along with her colleague, Caitlin Breedlove, who also worked in youth programming at Highlander. They applied as an interracial team (Caitlin is white, Paulina is Chicana) and were selected to run the organization. Under their guidance, SONG began a process of reconstitution, growth and revitalization.

During this same time, the same-sex marriage equality fight was coming to the South in Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia. SONG became engaged out of necessity—it was a full frontal assault on LGBT rights, yet a lot of national organizations were writing off southern states because they were in the Bible belt. This made SONG's base angry and resentful of what was essentially a slash-and-burn campaign. SONG understood that while marriage equality is important, it was a narrow issue that was employing problematic, divisive approaches within campaign fights. There wasn't an opportunity to mass mobilize or develop deep leadership tied to movement building, and, crucially, people of color were being demonized and blamed for the losses, which pitted queer people of color against their own communities.

Against this fraught political backdrop, Paulina began asking some key questions: “What would it mean to create a different and new South where LGBTQ people of color are central to organizing? What if LGBTQ leaders of color were clearly visible and could define their roles in multiple freedom struggles? What would it look like to build supportive infrastructure so that there is safety in the South—so people need not flock to Atlanta, Miami, the San Francisco Bay Area, or New York City, but can stay at home and live the lives they want to have, with dignity?”

Paulina started answering these questions by collaborating with Mandy, Caitlin, and the Highlander Center and creating the “Beyond Same Sex Think Tank,” which was designed to curate leadership in the South around these intersectional issues affecting queer people of color. Even amidst the same-sex marriage campaigns that were burgeoning in the South, people of color were dismissing the issue because they couldn't identify points of unity or did not see that piece as central to their lives. “Beyond Same Sex” attempted to base-build by coalescing people around shared politics and values that incorporated an intersectional analysis of oppression.

This project that intentionally looked beyond the single-issue organizing and political landscape of that moment led to a rapid reconfiguration of SONG. A new board emerged, and SONG transitioned from a support-based organization into a more formal membership-based organization that could build political power with its base. One of the first projects this new SONG launched was a year-long listening tour. SONG traveled all over the South to meet and talk to people about their issues, their options for political education, and their engagement with pre-existing LGBT infrastructure. Paulina knew that people have multiple identities; she wanted to know how that mapped out in the South.

This listening tour surfaced some critical insights, one being that the South's relationship to right-wing Christianity and white supremacy had resulted in profound historical trauma within, and pathologization of, LGBT communities. People were wounded not just on a somatic and internalized level, but also spiritually, and this was impeding their ability to have wholesome relationships to spirituality and to the institution of the Christian church. Another insight

they gleaned was about the lack of a movement engine to build capacity in communities, or to share language, political education, and organizing best practices statewide. Even though people were training to do issue-specific work, there was a severe lack of resources for actually aggregating regional power and social capital. Some of this was because of rampant homophobia and transphobia, and some of it was because the LGBT leadership was predominantly white-centric and frequently tokenized people instead of authentically engaging them. In general, the South was underdeveloped in terms of intersectional LGBTQ infrastructure. People had been conditioned to engage in racial justice work without being out at the same time, and vice versa.

SONG began deliberately positioning itself to fill these gaps through multiple strategies. It first reoriented internally around four new core principles: land, work, body, and spirit. These four things were integral to the holistic well-being, vibrancy, and health of SONG's base. SONG wanted to focus on people's relationship to land, their experiences around work and labor, their physical and bodily experiences with wellness, justice, anti-violence, gender expression and rights, and, lastly, their spirit and resiliency, which gave them the will and strength to survive. SONG understood that these four arenas were the sites where multiple oppressions manifested and therefore communities had to fortify these sites and transform them into spaces for resistance and liberation. Central to these core principles was an understanding that all of this work had to involve a thoughtful healing component. In seeding racial justice and LGBT power, SONG had to identify ways to heal wounded communities that were bearing the brunt and memory of historical and intergenerational trauma from racism and white supremacy, right-wing Christianity, economic oppression, rural isolation, and environmental degradation. Connecting all of these struggles to sexual and gender liberation would require a lot of work, and that work would have to start with healing and a spiritual imperative.

SONG also wanted to fill the resource and education gap that was impeding LGBT movement building in the South. So, in 2007, it began the SONG Organizing School, a flagship program that provided an ideological groundwork for new LGBT and racial justice organizers. The School's goal was to create a generation of leaders equipped with robust political education so that they could engage beyond the nonprofit complex to actually build and sustain movements. To this end, it provided students with Organizing 101 trainings, supported their political analyses, lifted up liberatory practices from LGBT communities nationwide, and helped them move past identity politics into intersectionality. Over the course of the program, each organizing school began to function as a statewide think tank.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina changed everything in the South, including organizing in general and SONG in particular. Thousands of people of color were left stranded by the federal government for days. An environmental disaster that laid bare the ruthless system of structural racism and classism in the South, Katrina was both a slap in the face and a wake-up call for Southern organizers. For SONG, it provided the stark realization that building movement infrastructure was not actually about the infrastructure itself—at the heart of it were people. SONG thought it was building community support systems, but in reality it had built organizational relationships with its base. When suddenly people's offices were underwater, and no one could reach them because nobody had their personal cell phones, it became clear that institutional and organizational relationships alone were insufficient. Strong interpersonal relationships that included mutual trust and interdependence had to be cultivated.

Katrina revealed the shaky skeletal nature of Southern public infrastructure, which was plagued by mass neglect, disinvestment in poor communities of color, and under-resourcing. "What would it have looked like the day before Katrina hit for our folks in our bases to have engaged with it differently?" SONG reflected. They determined that they needed to move out of traditional organizational relationships to build multilayered personal relationships with

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their base. “We need to have strong organizational relationships,” said Paulina, “but they have to be founded in personal relationships. When people leave, they have no relations with each other.” This was also a reminder to SONG that movement building work in the South relies on political trust-building and personal relationships as a foundational practice. “People care in the South. We don’t commit to work beyond our capacity, and SONG is concerned about inviting people into spaces where it’s trustworthy.” This praxis of growing trust, of healing shared trauma, of understanding correlations among land, labor, body and spirit, of developing political and ideological capacity and skills, and of strengthening political power has made SONG’s story truly unique.

SOMOS GEORGIA

Since 1993, SONG has been proactively amplifying the voices of Southern intersectional movement work. In that time, the South has been increasingly populated by immigrants, many from Mexico and Latin America, as well as significant numbers from Southeast Asia. Families of Southern immigrants are frequently mixed status, with documented and undocumented residents living together. Even with prevailing anti-immigrant animosity, there has been a lot of work towards building unity between Black communities that have been there for generations and the new arrivals. Some of this work has included an analysis of oppressions related to gender expression and sexuality. Movements have tried to create access points across identities to emphasize shared survival. In doing cross-issue organizing, SONG has had to deal with the particular challenges of isolation in rural areas, pitting of their constituents against each other, and building political trust in their base while deploying an intersectional lens.

Today, they have approximately 870 members in their base from all over the South and some national members that are not in the South. Their biggest membership is in North Carolina, and they are rapidly growing their base in Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia. They have slightly less presence in Alabama, and while they consider Texas as politically Southern, they don’t have capacity to expand their organizing efforts into Texas yet.

SONG is currently at a stage of digging into state-specific strategies. “While it’s great to have a region-wide organization like SONG so we can have convergences and opportunities for people to build at the regional level, people often go back to their states and have very little infrastructure, specifically queer people of color infrastructure,” said Paulina.

SONG is often called on to organize autonomous queer people of color in the South, and there are some regional spaces (like Black Pride) where they can leverage their work and increase visibility for their base. SONG wants to create these spaces not just on the regional level, but also through state-specific strategies. Their website explains their goal as “organizing LGBTQ Southern people to protect and defend our communities against the most repressive pieces of legislation coming down on us in the South, whether they are directed at Immigrants, LGBTQ people, or other oppressed communities being scape-goated.”

SONG is currently focusing on North and South Carolina, Virginia, Alabama, and Georgia. In response to the policy battle around the anti-immigrant bill HB 87 in 2011, SONG decided to select Georgia as an anchor state and form the coalition for a campaign they named Somos Georgia/We Are Georgia.

HB 87 is the copy-cat SB 1070 “show your papers” bill that was proposed in Georgia in 2011. While there were a host of other anti-immigrant bills, like an “English-only” bill, HB87 was the heaviest fight because advocates of the bill knew that if it passed in Georgia, they could move it into other southern states. SONG understood the impact of such a bill—creating conditions of fear, isolation, scarcity, heavy reliance on racial profiling—and its direct impact on LGBTQ communities of color, so they had to address it forcefully.

(Continued on next page)

SONG joined forces with the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR) to form Somos Georgia/We Are Georgia. GLAHR is the largest state-wide immigrant rights group, fighting abuses, police brutality, detention, and repressive enforcement. SONG also joined with the Georgia Refugee Rights Campaign and secured national partnership from National Day Laborers Organizing Network (NDLON).

SONG wanted to help coordinate leadership and strategizing around fighting HB87, and also more broadly strengthen racial justice and queer people of color alliances and organizing in Georgia. SONG knew that the bill was confusing, massive in its implications, and difficult to understand because it was framed as a policy intervention for protecting American jobs. It was a hypocritical bill, said Paulina, who pointed out that the state has historically made use of non-American labor when it suited Georgia employers. “Before the Olympics came to Georgia in 1996,” said Paulina, “the stadium wasn’t finished. So either the city or state called the Mexican consulate and said that we needed Mexican workers, and we’d make sure that the police wouldn’t harass them. So, there was a massive call for workers, documented or not. People came and built the stadium, and essentially the Olympics was one of the things that made Atlanta an international city, and they settled in Georgia. And now we have Southern states taking away drivers licenses for folks who don’t have social security numbers.”

In order to build capacity for this fight, SONG convened an LGBTQ left coalition in Atlanta to do political education. They strategically built and supported multiracial organizing and flanked GLAHR’s work. They wanted to engage where people were already mobilizing and share the platform to engage both bases, as well as create political coverage for future work.

While Somos Georgia was unable to stop the parts of HB 87 that legalized profiling and required employers to use “E-Verify” in 2011, they were able to successfully prevent a draconian clause on “harboring” from passing. The “harboring clause” would have made it a crime (first a misdemeanor and then a felony) to work with or drive in cars with undocumented people. This would not only legalize segregation based on immigration status, but it also would have been disastrously divisive and oppressive for movement-building infrastructure and bridging work among communities in the South. Through rigorous coalition-building, SONG, through Somos Georgia, was able to win an indefinite injunction against this clause in HB 87.

SENDOLO DIAMANAH

Sendolo Diamanah is a queer, gender-bending Black individual and a transplant from the Midwest to the South. Originally from Kalamazoo in southwest Michigan, Sendolo grew up in an Afrocentric neighborhood that was two hours away by car from the larger metropolitan cities of Chicago and Detroit. Since Sendolo’s great grandmother arrived in Michigan, the family centered around her presence and the Midwest. She and Sendolo’s grandmother took care of Sendolo when he was a child. At 100 years, Sendolo’s great-grandmother died in 2011. “I spent most of my time with old ladies”, Sendolo said. “They shaped my personality!”

Sendolo was drawn to move to the South from Michigan because he wanted to farm, and also because he identified the South as having historical relevance for him. He wanted to do organic farming with and for people of color in general and Black communities in particular. Sendolo had a complex mental picture of the South, both as an idea and as a region.

In talking about his choice to relocate, Sendolo referenced Dr. Mindy Fullilove’s book *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It*.³ According to the organization Root Shock, the term is adapted from gardening and refers to “the traumatic stress reaction to the loss of one’s emotional ecosystem.”

“When people stay in a place for a period of time, the social webs are denser,” said Sendolo. When you uproot people, their emotional ecosystem gets damaged. It’s important to look at what happens in Black communities because of constant displacement that is both voluntary and forced because of how capital functions. For instance, agriculture gets mechanized, factories close, Black people lose jobs, and then they move and live where jobs are available for our communities.”

Root shock within Black communities in the South is both historical and contemporary. First, of course, is the forced uprooting from Africa. But there follows enslavement, serial expulsions, exclusion, repeated natural disasters, and war. More recent social, political and economic forces include gentrification, development-related displacement, industrialization and de-industrialization, rural blight, and disinvestment in the region. All these forces have structural, institutional, and deeply personal impacts. Collectively, they define and constrain spaces of belonging for displaced, diasporic and migrant communities, and determine where and how ‘home’ can actually exist.

“What’s left out of (Fullilove’s) book is the South,” Sendolo stated. “Blacks have a mainland in the South. For Black folks not in the South, we think of it as a period of time, not as a place. We think of what it was like back then, under Jim Crow. When you hear about the South in the stories up North, it’s never the contemporary South. There is this conception in the North that the South is a repressive place while the North is liberal. But the truth is that the North is repressive too. Parts of our family, our history and our roots are in the South. And, like many other experiences of migration, home is often remembered and thought of in static terms.”

Sendolo’s first Southern home was in Raleigh, where he didn’t know anyone. He found a job working at a hotel and began organizing in response to the thick racial tensions among his Black coworkers at the front desk, the South Asian owners, the white managers, and the Latina housekeepers.

During this tumultuous time in his relocation to the South, Sendolo found himself writing an angry letter and looking up a quote by Audre Lorde online. Accidentally, he found SONG’s website. “Oh my God,” he said. “I knew this organization was made for me.” Sendolo was drawn to SONG because amidst the destructive forces of isolation, racism, homophobia, and division, it was an organization that created an intentional home for people to be their whole selves. Sendolo took the bus from Raleigh to Durham in 2008, met with Paulina and Caitlin and cried as he told them about his life. A few weeks later, he moved to Durham to begin organizing with SONG. “I wouldn’t be able to heal from my experiences of homophobia if it wasn’t for SONG.”

“SONG creates a sense of home,” said Sendolo. “If you talk to SONG members, you’ll hear this again and again. When we did the 15th anniversary, the quinceañera, we talked about it as a queer homecoming. That’s really important for our work. It shapes our vision for where we’re trying to go.”

By making space for queer homecoming, and also by giving attention to the spiritual healing of LGBT and people of color communities, SONG creates a supportive environment for queer organizers of color to come together, heal, and speak to a unique, integrated experience. Sendolo explained that frequently we forget that queer communities of color have experiences not just of displacement and exclusion, but also of banishment and exile. “Queer people within the South often migrate to bigger cities like Atlanta...But also people are looking for a way out of the South entirely, like to San Francisco or New York, because we feel exiled.”

SONG rejects the idea that traumatic experiences of exile or root shock will continue to define the South. By creating a grassroots infrastructure that operates among multiple identities and

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—SENDOLO DIAMANAH

centralizes the role of land, work, body and spirit, SONG makes it possible for queer people who miss their homeland in the South to come home. This also creates a durable, yet tensile community network that allows people to choose their whole selves, instead of just their racial identity, or just their gender or sexual identity. By organizing in the interstices, SONG has become a resource for acceptance and shared language that makes it possible for queer people of color to more easily navigate Southern terrain. “A lot of people have been told that they can’t be Southern and Black and queer at the same time. So they feel like they have to choose something,” said Sendolo. By prioritizing embodied leadership, where segmented and fractured parts of identity can come together and by using language around migration and exile to articulate these experiences, SONG tries to eradicate this impossible choice.

Embodied leadership for SONG also involves going beyond a reactive approach to organizing and alliance-building. To be truly visionary and proactive, the imperative has to be more than just unifying people of color and LGBT communities around shared interests. SONG’s goal is not just a better, more unified progressive movement—it is completely transformed communities that centralize the experiences of the marginalized so that the very meaning of what it is to be a community changes. It is the freedom from the colonial legacy of the false gender binary, it is the liberatory potential of queer and trans-positive politics and racial justice to together dismantle the interlocking systems of oppression in our communities.

Being queer in predominantly straight spaces is not without its risks. Sendolo recalled his experience visiting a local high school in a Black working-class neighborhood of Durham as part of an education campaign. “I was terrified, but if you show weakness, it’s like blood to sharks,” he recalled. “So, I showed up in heels, and I was fierce. Some hurtful things happened—some kids called me a faggot, others took pictures of me on their cellphones. But the ones I worked with loved me, which gave me the confidence to personally be out in this work.”

The personal expression of gender and sexual identity was an extension of Sendolo’s political work. For Sendolo, to be unapologetically authentic was also a clarion call for others—whether queer or straight—to question their own gender and sexual politics. “The liberatory potential of queer politics is not just about creating queer spaces for people to be ourselves, but about uprooting patriarchy, which frees everybody,” explained Sendolo. “So, if I want to wear heels, I will, and we can talk about that, which liberates everybody. Boys will come and talk to me about their feelings when they don’t feel like they have to be male, and women relate to me differently.”

Patriarchy and binary gender roles are a legacy of colonialism, according to Sendolo. Previously, indigenous and communities of color had autonomous systems to understand gender. However, Europeans imposed their system unilaterally on the populations they colonized, so men went to work and women stayed at home. There were no other roles for those who didn’t conform to being male or female. Roles that used to exist for gender-nonconforming people were wiped out—a cultural genocide, said Sendolo.

Therefore, much of what are assumed to be cultural beliefs and practices of communities of color, such as homophobia, are really just remnants of the colonial legacy. “We can’t talk about how people of color communities are more homophobic without accepting that white supremacy has wiped out our cultural traditions of gender nonconformity,” Sendolo stated. “Black church leaders who have bought into the dominant, capitalist system ally themselves with the hegemonic ways of thinking. Their vision of what is a Black community continues the process of colonization and genocide.”

The alternative to colonial patriarchy is gender sovereignty, an idea that Sendolo and others at SONG have been developing. Gender sovereignty is the rejection of the colonial construction of gender, understanding that challenging white supremacy is linked to challenging the gender binary. LGBT people of color challenge colonial gender norms and

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—SENDOLO DIAMANAH

therefore the colonial imposition of patriarchy. “The history of private property ownership is linked to gender oppression. Men owned property and passed it onto their sons; women were controlled because of their reproductive functions; women were property” explained Sendolo. “But, queer people are a threat to the ‘naturalness’ of that constructed social unit, the ‘family’ as it is limitedly defined in patriarchal terms.”

Therefore, the struggle for racial justice is inextricably linked to the liberation of gender and sexuality. However, gay rights are often seen as a white people’s movement. “Most mainstream gay organizations don’t understand the nature of the struggle of people of color,” said Sendolo. “They’re interested in integration, in getting rights, so they fight the GOP on anti-gay propositions and ballot measures. But, the gay organizations haven’t prioritized the struggle for gender liberation in communities of color. If they did, their membership would look very different.” “We’re not interested in fighting against our communities of color for these abstract liberal rights,” Sendolo added. “We’re interested in transforming our communities.”

CONCLUSION

For almost twenty years, SONG has been the political home for a variety of LGBT leaders, primarily queers of color. Not only has SONG been a queer homecoming for many, as Sendolo described, but SONG has also been at the forefront of defining what gender and sexual liberation could look like in the future. SONG promotes ideas such as gender and sexual sovereignty that can help transform all of us, regardless of whether we identify as straight, lesbian, bisexual, gay, trans, or queer. This space has much to do with the vision of the six cofounders to create a flexible and fluid organization where sexuality is just one of the many intersections in an analysis of systems of race, capitalism, and militarism.

The struggle for LGBT liberation by SONG has always meant more than advocating for a narrow slice of interests. Gender and sexual equity exist alongside SONG’s fight for dignity and respect for farmworkers, for undocumented immigrants, and for working-class people of color. This is a holistic and fundamentally syncretic perspective that considers all of the intersections that comprise one’s identity, instead of isolating one aspect and making that the entirety of one’s politics. “I make more of an impact in fighting homophobia in working-class and Black communities by being an organizer in them,” said Sendolo. “When I walk into a room in a dress, but I help you get back your wages, or I stand shoulder to shoulder with you when you get kicked out of your house, or I listen to you talk about your experience of domestic violence, it transforms what you think of a queer person. More than any Prop 8 campaign.”

Unfortunately, SONG is exceptional in the movement for LGBT equity. Many groups are narrowly focused on a single issue, such as gay marriage, to the exclusion of other aspects of identity. These issue siloes can alienate communities of color, whether queer or straight. SONG’s model is one that mainstream LGBT organizations, as well as racial justice advocates, can learn from. All of us can benefit from challenging gender constructs and norms that program our perception of ourselves and others. In this sense, SONG’s analysis can be transformative for all marginalized and oppressed communities—for the white LGBTs and the working-class people of color.

What better place to engage in this pioneering work than in the South? The region is a microcosm of demographic and cultural shifts that we experience nationally. These shifts include the influx of Latino and Asian immigrants, the transition from an industrial economy to a service-based one, and the ascendance of a white reactionary class that uses race and culture to divide and conquer communities of color. “I don’t think there’s more homophobia in the South than in other parts of the country,” Paulina said. “But, there aren’t the same infrastructures and level of resources available here to buffer some of the homo- and transphobia that people experience. The answer isn’t just to have our own, autonomous queer and transgender infrastructure. We have to work together with other communities experiencing oppression and marginalization, to survive and to thrive.”

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ENDNOTES

INTRODUCTION

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