Queer Alliances: 
Neoliberalism and Radical Aspirations

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Same-sex marriage has occupied a central position in the culture wars of American politics for over eighteen years, since the Hawaiian Supreme Court ruling in *Baehr v. Levin* in 1993. The national firestorm unleashed by the Hawaiian court quickly mobilized opposition, eventually leading to the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act, which was signed into law by President Clinton in 1996. These events laid the groundwork for fierce intra-debates on the left, generated between queer theorists and activists on one side who fervently argued against the normative implications of homosexual marriage, and the mainstream gay and lesbian movement on the other side who framed the battle for same-sex marriage in terms of ‘rights.’ The debate quickly congealed into a familiar paradigm where the queer viewpoint argues in terms of difference and new social formulations, while the mainstream movement argues in terms of equality—utilizing analogies to the civil rights movements—often labeling the struggle the “civil rights issue of our generation.”

The civil-rights narrative, as a state-by-state political strategy, has met with moderate success in Democratic-majority states and led to fierce defeat and backlash in Republican-majority states. Same-sex marriage advocates consistently employ a ‘separate but equal’ argument against any set of spousal or household recognitions, which do not act in the name of marriage. At this critical juncture in American politics, when women’s access to contraceptive healthcare is under attack, when economic inequality and unemployment ravage the middle and lower classes, when political activism is delimited by an individual’s consumer choices, it is imperative that queer theorists and activists forge new alliances between people of difference in order to combat the bipartisan neoliberal practices of the twenty-first century.

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This paper rejects the use of a civil rights narrative as an inclusive political tactic and argues that such narratives are the source of severe cleavages within the wider LGBTQ population. My goal is to highlight the potential for mobilization along a different social axis—a mobilization forged not solely through sexual identity, but rather through shared points of oppression. I will show how this strategy is already at work in many emerging sites of protest and contestation; areas such as healthcare, housing, police brutality, imprisonment, and immigration to name a few. This strategy is quietly forging new political coalitions—queer alliances—between people, groups, and organizations currently oppressed, in very different ways, by the constraints of legislation and political policies that promote the heteronormative family structure as the site of individual security. My analysis leans heavily on the work of David Eng, Lisa Duggan, and Sarah Ahmed. In what follows I will make three distinct moves: first, I evaluate the rise of the queer liberal subject, secondly, I examine the emerging sites of contestation that offer new potential for movements centered around difference, equity, and social justice, and finally, I aim to reorient the prevalent perception that queer theory is merely a politics of refusal and counter that these emerging coalitions represent a politics of aspiration.

Before beginning my analysis, it will be useful to briefly look at the current state of the same-sex marriage battle. As of the writing of this paper, same-sex marriage is legal, or will soon become legal, in seven states and the District of Columbia (MA, CT, VT, IA, NH, NY & WA); nine states have same-sex partnership recognition through domestic partnerships or civil unions (CA, DE, NJ, OR, NV, IL, HI, RI); one state recognizes marriages from other states (MD), and three states have laws providing some benefits to same-sex couples (ME, WI, CO). According to the Human Rights Campaign, as of January 2010, twenty-nine states have enacted state

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constitutional amendments defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman; twelve states have state laws defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman; and eighteen states have enacted laws that prohibit any form of same-sex partnership recognition. The picture is currently in flux, with successes and defeats occurring through legislation, judicial decisions, and the ballot box.

This labyrinth of state laws and constitutional amendments obfuscates a broader point: state marriage is not equal to federal marriage. The Obama Administration has refused to defend the Defense of Marriage Act, and the act has been declared unconstitutional in recent years by two federal judges. The Government Accountability Office identifies 1,138 statutory provisions provided to married couples at the federal level. The rights and benefits included in these reports are broken into distinct categories of laws: Social Security and Related Programs, Housing and Food Stamps, Veterans' Benefits, Taxation, Federal Civilian and Military Service Benefits, Employment Benefits and Related Laws, Immigration, Naturalization, and Aliens, Indians, Trade, Commerce, and Intellectual Property, Financial Disclosure and Conflict of Interest, Crimes and Family Violence, Loans, Guarantees, and Payments. The breadth of areas of personal life covered by federal marriage law certainly emboldens the argument that to deny same-sex couples equal access to these rights is an obvious injustice. However, neither same-sex marriage proponents nor their right-wing opponents have ever given a satisfactory answer to questions concerning why such a vast array of rights, concerning such disparate areas as taxes,
health care, and immigration, should be bestowed only upon coupled citizens. It is from this vantage point from which I begin the exploration of queer alliances within this turbulent political landscape.
The anthropologist, David Eng, identifies the emergence of queer liberalism in his book *The Feeling of Kinship*, noting how the term queer has been transformed and reinterpreted by the gay and lesbian citizen-subject:

…the term [queer] has become increasingly unmoored from its theoretical potentials and possibilities. Instead, it has come to demarcate more narrowly pragmatic gay and lesbian identity politics, the economic interests of neoliberalism and whiteness, and liberal political norms of inclusion—including access to marriage, custody, inheritance, and service in the military. Today “queer” and “rights” as well as “queer” and “marriage” no longer strike us as paradoxical in terms of antithetical prepositions.Eng ties the implementation of neoliberal policies to the rise of the ‘gay rights’ movement wherein a queer liberalism emerged, disconnected from queer theories’ projects of de-centering and deconstructing identity and promoting non-heteronormative modes of life. It seems as is queer is hardly queer anymore. Queer and gay become synonymous through this lens, or at least increasingly difficult to decipher and distinguish.

Eng persuasively stitches together the same-sex marriage movement and the transformation of modern capitalism. He makes visible, within the project for marriage equality, the exclusion of race in favor of the promotion of sexual identity. If we understand the thrust of queer activism and queer theory to have once been focused, in part, on critiques of essentialized identity categories as the basis for political mobilization, then the rise of queer liberalism signals a turn that mobilizes actors politically by a constant and prevailing reference solely to sexual identity. And it does so primarily through reference to the African-American civil rights struggle. In order for this strategy to have purchase it relies on the presupposition that the problems of race have effectively been solved. Specifically, Eng describes how the discourses surrounding the
Lawrence v. Texas Supreme Court ruling, ending the criminalization of sodomy, ignored the racial aspects of the case in favor of the victory for homosexual rights, “By analogizing Lawrence to Brown [v. Board of Education] and Loving [v. Virginia], gay and lesbian activists configure queer liberalism as a political project in the present while consigning racism as a political project of the past.”

A similar process takes place when gay and lesbian activists are confronted with alternatives to gay marriage: civil unions, domestic partnerships, or domestic beneficiaries. Andrew Sullivan, writing in the New Republic argues that, “Marriage, under any interpretation of American constitutional law, is among the most basic civil rights. ‘Separate but equal’ was a failed and pernicious policy with regard to race; it will be a failed and pernicious policy with regard to sexual orientation.” Clearly, on the surface there is bite to this argument. A separate institution, which is only inclusive of gay and lesbian couples and is distinct from marriage, appears obviously discriminatory. However, a progressive formulation of alternative household arrangements has never been predicated on prohibiting heterosexuals from entering into civil unions, or domestic partnerships. Here, Eng’s analysis captures the way in which race is hidden in contemporary sexual politics. By calling back to ‘separate but equal’ policies and therefore implying the universal applicability of the Brown v. Board of Education ruling, racial politics are marginalized, de-contextualized, and read as completed. Furthermore, the simple analogy equates the forced segregation of black school children with the marriage rights of gays and lesbians, thereby collapsing historical specificity and context in each case. This comparison is not only rhetorically clumsy but it presents a unified LGBTQ population, one free of internal

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8 Ibid, P. 17
racism. What violence is done to history through these analogies? What is at stake when we collapse all struggles of difference within each other? What stories do we lose? What stories do we create?

Moreover, Eng’s analysis points out the lack of an intersectional perspective within the same-sex marriage movement. This glaring omission was made viscerally apparent in the aftermath of the Proposition 8 ballot measure in California in 2008, which temporarily put an end to same-sex marriage in the state. Many same-sex marriage proponents quickly shifted blame onto African American Californians. Kheven LaGrone, an Oakland based artist and writer, points to this moment when the privilege and racism of the same-sex movement was put into broad relief:

Like the rest of California, some African Americans supported gay marriage and some didn’t. But at anti-Proposition 8 rallies, white protesters hurled racial invectives at African-Americans—even at African Americans holding up “No On Prop 8” signs. Angry people often say what they honestly think—obviously, those white attackers believed African Americans were not their equal. Their targeting African Americans said, “How dare you lowly Negroes question our white skin entitlement.” They also expressed white ownership of “marriage equality.”

LaGrone furthers Eng’s analysis and points out that one of the key problems with the appropriation of civil-rights language is that it assumes all LGBTQ Americans exist under one giant, unified rainbow flag. Yet racism, classism, ageism, transphobia, and hatred exist within LGBTQ communities and we ignore them at our own peril. The lack of intersectional analyses, perspectives, and voices in the mainstream movement is one of the primary reasons why these analogies, used as political tactics, further internal cleavages along familiar lines.

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In order to understand the emergence of the same-sex marriage movement we cannot view it rising in a vacuum. We must fully grapple with the complex political and economic framework within which its emergence has taken place. To do so we must understand the intense transformations undertaken by the state through neoliberal policies directed at the family. This means focusing on poverty and wealth redistribution rather than assimilation and recognition.

Queers for Economic Justice (QEJ), formed in the late 1990s as a loose activist network, focused on issues of poverty and inequity, and formally incorporated in 2002. Kenyon Farrow, the former director of QEJ, describes the interrelationship between neoliberal policies directed at the family and how they affect low-income LGBTQ people:

Initially the organization worked on homelessness and welfare as its primary issues. Many people do not think about welfare and public assistance in the U.S. and how it impacts low-income LGBT people. In 1997, the federal government passed the Welfare Reform Act, which ended public assistance, and welfare, as we once knew it. Part of that policy change created a situation where there was more money being put into marriage promotion for low-income women in order to get their public assistance benefits to take care of their children as well as forcing women to have to identify biological fathers on birth certificates in order to get those benefits as well. If you are a lesbian with children and don't have contact with the father anymore, or you had a baby in an arrangement where it was understood that that man was not going to be a primary caretaker of that child, naming him on the birth certificate so that the State could go after him for child support payments didn't make any sense, so they found themselves in a catch-22. QEJ was really formed because of some of those issues.  

President Clinton signed the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act” on August 22, 1996 and one month later he signed the “Defense of Marriage Act.” Welfare reform fundamentally changed the way in which the state addressed low-income people in the United States, and the Defense of Marriage Act fundamentally re-defined the family for the state. These two events have much more in common than simply the dates in which they were enacted. As Farrow notes, for low-income LGBTQ people, navigating the maze of regulations and requirements...
for welfare benefits was now coupled with the promotion of heteronormative family values. Judith Stacey, professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University, states, “The 1996 Welfare Reform Act poured the political concrete for a profound shift in the priorities of national poverty policy from promoting welfare to promoting marriage.” Welfare and marriage become deeply imbricated through these transformations under Clinton. At the same time marriage becomes the symbolic site of political equality for gays and lesbians. These converging imperatives set the stage for the political battles of low-income people as well as the proponents of same-sex marriage.

Policies ‘supporting’ healthy families metastasized under President George W. Bush and have continued under President Obama. In 2002, President Bush reinterpreted a key provision of the Welfare Reform Act, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program or TANF, in order to refocus the program’s goals toward the promotion of two-parent families: “Our proposal will place a greater emphasis in TANF on strengthening families and improving the well-being of children. Enhanced funding will be made available for research, demonstrations, technical assistance, and matching grants to states. An increased focus on marriage and child well-being will be added to both the purposes of the program and the state plan requirements.” President Obama has continued these ‘welfare’ policies, adding a signature plan to focus on the importance of fatherhood. On June 21, 2010 Obama launched his ‘Fatherhood and Mentoring Initiative.” The initiative “…will continue the President’s effort to impact father absence in America through partnerships with fatherhood and family-serving groups and role models around the

country.”\textsuperscript{14} This initiative is made up of a coalition of offices and organizations including the Administration for Children and Families, the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, the Department of Labor, parent-teacher organizations, churches, and other local groups. These initiatives focus on low-income people, particularly low-income single-parent families, and should not be excluded from a larger discussion on the state of contemporary marriage in America. Certainly, these neoliberal policies affect people in very different ways producing very different outcomes.

The focus of this section is to highlight these tensions because we cannot understand the modern queer liberal subject and the movement for same-sex marriage without understanding the contemporary context of marriage. Furthermore, in the next section, I aim to underscore the current political possibilities within this neoliberal framework. Any progressive goal regarding the promotion of non-heteronormative families and queer modes of life must address the transformation of welfare programs into programs that now promote ‘healthy’ families. To ignore this would blind us to broader issues of race, class, and social (in) justice operating within the lgbtq community.

The rise of the queer liberal subject is entangled within a complex matrix of neoliberal family policies, civil-rights analogies, and queer critiques. These discourses have converged and helped produce the boundaries of the queer liberal subject. How then can we conceptualize this emergence and at the same time demarcate a path for progressive equity?

Nancy Fraser addresses a similar set of discursive practices through which neoliberal policies have created a feminist ‘double.’ In her article, \textit{Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning}

\textsuperscript{14} “President Obama Launches Next Phase in Fatherhood Efforts with The President's Fatherhood and Mentoring Initiative.” The White House. Office of the Press Secretary, 21 June 2010. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-
of History, she explains that this feminist doublegänger has formed, in part, because of the success of the feminist movement, “…the cultural changes jump-started by the second wave, salutary in themselves, have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalism society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society.”

So too, we can see a relationship between the early gay liberation movements, HIV/AIDS activism, and the formation of queer theory being used directly against such viewpoints in contemporary politics. Queer visions of a just society, often in line with feminist visions, have been eclipsed by the ‘civil-rights movement of this generation.’ Fraser highlights a feminist discursive construct, which has escaped the control of what she terms ‘social movement feminism,’ namely the combined effects of second-wave feminism. “An offspring of feminism in the first, social-movement sense, this second, discursive sense of ‘feminism’ has gone rogue. As the discourse becomes independent of the movement, the latter is increasingly confronted with a strange shadowy version of itself, an uncanny double that it can neither simply embrace or wholly disavow.”

If we can say that feminism has ‘gone rogue’ it seems that the queer double, the queer liberal subject, has enlisted. The queer double is reporting for duty both, literally, with the repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, and metaphorically enlisting into the heteronormative family. Also, like the feminist double, we can neither embrace nor disavow queer liberalism. As Lisa Duggan writes in The Nation in 2009, “For better or worse, national LGBT politics is now focused on marriage equality.”
Those who argue for a more equitable distribution of the benefits connected to marriage must grapple with the political and economic context surrounding marriage in America today. In what follows, I argue that we pivot our focus from critiques of gay marriage to the formation of new and unexpected alliances. From this analysis we can see that sexuality alone has not created a unified site for political contestation. Therefore I look back to the work of feminists and queers who called for coalitions of difference in order to begin mapping these queer alliances, many of which are currently taking place throughout the country, often in unexpected locations and between groups previously seen at odds. These alliances offer us the best pathway to dissociate queer visions of justice from the normalizing gaze of queer liberalism.
In looking back to feminism from the 1980s and 1990s, I aim to reevaluate theorists’ thoughts on the nature of difference during the period in which neoliberal policies became ascendant; these ideas offer solutions for our contemporary political moment. We can clearly see a through-line of thought, embracing difference over equality, in order to combat the fracturing of the feminist movement. In order to address the lack of accounting for race within feminist studies, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw promoted the idea of intersectionality as a way through such an impasse:

Recognizing that identity politics takes place at the site where categories intersect thus seems more fruitful than challenging the possibility of talking about categories at all. Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics.18

Crenshaw’s influential work highlights the limits of identity categories, demonstrating that any linguistic boundary of human beings inevitably comes at the expense of exclusion of differences and perspectives not captured within such labels. Her analysis gives us the opportunity to move beyond the fixed, rigid, and essentialized notions of identity in order to form ‘group politics’ which are cognizant and attentive to difference.

Similarly, Barbara Smith in conversation with her sister Beverley Smith, in This Bridge Called My Back notes, “What I really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you. I feel it is radical to be dealing with race and sex and class and sexual

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identity all at one time. I think that is radical because it has never been done before.” While Smith is, in this instance, speaking specifically against lesbian separatist movements, her point could not be more prescient. The question we ask ourselves evolves from one of ‘how do I organize with people who are like me’ to a question of ‘in what arenas do I find common cause with different people?’

The insecurity of America’s economy in our present moment has shaken the political ground for contestation. The Tea Party movement has mobilized, calling for an even more anemic federal government and is moving mainstream politics even further to the right. Meanwhile, this past fall the Occupy movement sprung up in public space across the country. While these movements are far from synonymous, in both structure and intention, we cannot afford at this juncture to organize on singular issues involving identity alone. Indeed, we should follow the advice of Cherrie Moraga, “Do we merely struggle with the ‘ism’ that’s sitting on the top of our own heads? The answer is: yes, I think first we do; and we must do so thoroughly and deeply. But to fail to move out from there will only isolate us in our own oppression--will only insulate, rather than radicalize us.” It should be evident that in this turn to the past I am not constructing new political solutions, but rather, looking towards political action and resistance from an unconventional perspective.

We must reach outward, particularly because the transformations of welfare and marriage do not affect one type of person, but many. We need to understand how these policies affect people of difference—differently—so as to mobilize political coalitions with broader frames of reference than identity. Lisa Duggan’s work has been on the forefront of such ideas for nearly a

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decade. In her article, *Beyond Gay Marriage*, written with Richard Kim in 2006, she highlights possible areas in which queer alliances around alternative household recognition could be formed:

Support for such a campaign might be drawn from a variety of constituencies: young adults, who are the least likely to be married as well as the least likely to have health insurance; single parents, many of whom now choose to live together in order to share housing, childcare and other costs; the elderly, who often live together after the death of a spouse or end of a marriage; caregivers, whose ability to tend to the elderly, sick, and disabled is often restricted by regulations that privilege marriage. Major corporations (almost half of which extend benefits to unmarried couples) as well as labor unions have opposed the marriage amendments on the grounds that domestic partnership agreements are necessary to provide for a diverse workforce.\(^{21}\)

In her description, we see that a coalition based on the broad inaccessibility to marriage benefits would center around issues such as healthcare, childcare, housing, hospice care, property rights, and retirement. These are coalitions based not upon identity but rather on the shared points of injustice in relation to the 1,138 benefits coupled with the federal institution of marriage. Judith Stacey rightly points out, “Marriage never has been and never will be an equal-opportunity institution.”\(^{22}\)

In her more recent work, Duggan points us towards a specific case study: queer organizing in Utah. In an article written for *The Nation* in 2009, Duggan notes her surprise at finding a vibrant network of queer organizing in one of the reddest states in the country. She describes the unusual coalition of actors who have come together forming the Common Ground Initiative (CGI):


Equality Utah, formulated an ingenious strategy. Drawing on the claims of LDS [Later Day Saints] officials and some conservative state politicians that their support of "traditional" marriage isn't antigay, and their assurances that they support other basic protections for LGBT citizens, Equality Utah drew up a list of just such protections. By capitalizing on this strategy they formed a Common Ground Initiative… Equality Utah then invited supporters of Prop 8 to demonstrate their lack of antigay rancor by supporting six legislative initiatives on the CGI platform: healthcare rights, fair workplace rights, fair housing rights, inheritance rights, domestic partnerships and clarification of Amendment 3 (removal of the "Super" part of the DOMA).  

Equality Utah was able to bring together a truly diverse coalition by highlighting rights and benefits, which should be universal and not simply a benefit of marriage. In their initiative they joined some of the benefits of marriage (healthcare, inheritance), with workers’ rights and housing rights. In doing so they formed a platform that was widely publicly supported and could not be easily opposed by the talking points of ‘defending the traditional family.’

In addition to Duggan’s trenchant work, we can similarly find queer alliances in other areas of contestation. One of the key benefits of marriage concerns immigration and naturalization. Straight couples, where one partner is from another country, can help naturalize their partners through marriage. However, without a federal same-sex marriage solution, equivalent lgbtq couples are deported. This glaring inequality will not be solved by a state-by-state strategy. In addition, the tremendous injustices of current U.S. immigration policies make it one of the most contested issues in each election cycle.

Victoria Hattam and Carlos Yescas have uncovered, within the immigration rights movement, the emergence of a queer alliance between undocumented and documented immigrants, lgbtq friendly churches, and lgbtq immigrants. In an investigation of the 2006 and 2008 May Day immigrant rights protests in Boston, they discovered a new rapidly forming

coalition, “We entered the field intending to examine the intersection of race and immigration…we came to see the cutting edge of politics forming at the intersection of sex and faith rather than race and immigration.”

Although, this coalition is itself contested within the broader framework of immigrants’ rights, less inclusive churches, and conservative members of the coalition, Hattam and Yescas point to immigration as possible site for new political oppositions. Indeed, they go on to state, “It is precisely these tensions between immigration and sexuality, and efforts to bridge them, that we saw many activists trying to navigate in our Boston fieldwork. How these conflicting pressures are negotiated in the near future will be of great consequence to the contours of immigrant politics for years to come.”

Since LGBTQ people exist within all communities there remains the possibility to forge queer coalitions across a broad spectrum of issues. Hattam and Yescas point to the convergence of sexual politics and immigration politics as a field for political action divorced from the same-sex marriage movement.

The San Francisco based collective HAVOQ launched their Undoing Borders project in 2007. The group actively engages in the types of political actions that Hattam and Yescas highlight. The queer collective coordinates and organizes with a wide array of immigrant rights groups, religious organizations, gay rights groups, and immigrant detention advocates, many of whom certainly would not find common ground in single issue battles such as same-sex marriage and gays in the military. In their manifesto they frame their demands as “Points of Unity,” which

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25 Ibid, 155.
26 Horizontal Alliance of Very (or Vaguely or Voraciously) Organized Queers.
opens up their work to possible adherents rather foreclosing such opportunities.\textsuperscript{27} Furthermore, the group is structured under a similar ideology, they describe their work as “Queer Organizing.”:

Some folks might look at this document or come to one of our meetings and ask what any of this has to do with being queer. We’re not working primarily on the im/migration issues traditionally understood to be The Gay Ones (asylum, bi-national marriage, etc.), so what do our sexualities and gender identities have to do with what we think about borders? Is it just that we’re a bunch of people organizing together who mostly happen to identify as queer? Not really, even though it’s nice to get use words like Fabulosity when we work on projects like this. Is this just another border-creating effort to define who’s in and who’s out? We hope not. Rather than viewing Queer as who or what we want, we see Queer as the how: the culture we create with one another, the platform from which we organize together...It’s about breaking down binaries (like black/white, woman/man) and recognizing how complex we all are—how our identities and communities overlap, merge and intersect.\textsuperscript{28}

Undoing Borders exemplifies the possibilities available to queer movements working under the strain of neoliberal policies, which aim to normalize, categorize, and differentiate people and groups primarily on identity.

Similar queer alliances are emerging all over the country. In New York, organizations such as: Queers for Economic Justice, the Audre Lorde Project, and FIERCE (an organization focusing on issues facing queer youth of color), now operate out of the same building. They organize on issues of homelessness, poverty, discrimination, racism, and workplace and housing rights. The Sylvia Rivera Law Project focusses on trans legal rights and activism across a broad array of issues, from criminal justice to name changing processes. Their slogan, “Liberation is a


\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, P. 7-8.
Collective Process,” exemplifies these ideas.\textsuperscript{29} The New Orleans group, BreakOut is working with the Juvenile Justice Project in Louisiana fighting the criminalization of queer youth and helping them to navigate the criminal justice system. The Los Angeles LGBTQ center hosts a series of intergenerational programs connecting young and old people through art and advocacy. Again and again new alliances are forming across the nation, often loosely organized around issues of identity but congealing around creating shared spaces and sites for groups of difference to engage in political activism.

The nascent Occupy movement attempts to organize on similar principles, but I hesitate to prognosticate about its full potential at this point, simply because to fully evaluate such a movement would require a much deeper analysis than this paper alone can offer. I do want to point out that the movement has been rightly criticized for being white and male centered,\textsuperscript{30} and at the same has shown some signs of addressing these issues. The Sylvia Rivera Law Project held a teach-in at Zucotti Park on October 6\textsuperscript{th} 2011\textsuperscript{31} to address many of these issues and multiple working groups associated with Occupy Wall Street have continued to organize long since the camps were removed.\textsuperscript{32} In terms of my analysis, Occupy promises a very exciting convergence of queer alliances, however, it also should serve as a warning—only the future will tell whether or not this movement will live up to such a promise or reify our familiar differences.

\textsuperscript{29} "Legal Services | Sylvia Rivera Law Project." Sylvia Rivera Law Project Website. \texttt{<http://srlp.org/services/legal>}. \\

\textsuperscript{32} "NYC General Assembly # Occupy Wall Street." User Groups Directory. # Occupy Wall Street Tech Ops. \texttt{<http://www.nycga.net/groups/>}. 

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Same-sex marriage will certainly remain a key point of cultural contestation in the upcoming 2012 presidential elections. However, we should not focus our attention, as queer theorists and social justice activists, solely on this one site of contestation. A panoply of resistance sites are emerging, bringing together a broad array of actors. Indeed, coalitions of difference offer hope to visions of queer justice. A set of alliances that follows Joan Scott’s divination from 1988:

The first [project] is the systematic criticism of the operations of categorical difference, the exposure of the kinds of exclusions and inclusions--the hierarchies--it constructs, and a refusal of their ultimate “truth”. A refusal, however, not in the name of an equality that implies sameness or identity, but rather (and this is the second move) in the name of an equality that rests on differences--differences that confound, disrupt, and render ambiguous the meaning of any fixed binary opposition. To do anything else is to buy into the political argument that sameness is a requirement for equality, an untenable position for feminists (and historians) who know that power is constructed on and so must be challenged from the ground of difference.\(^{33}\)

Queer theorists have noted the exclusions and hierarchies inherent in the same-sex marriage debate for over a decade. Now faced with our queer double, we must focus our efforts on these new sites of resistance in order to connect people of difference. The economic and political instability of the 2000s has put into place a new framework for the field of politics. The stalemate between same-sex marriage advocates and opponents at the national level should signal the urgency with which we should work towards queer alliances, not simply in the name of gay and lesbian people and ‘rights,’ but in terms of broad efforts for social justice and financial equity. Duggan, Hattam and Yescas, and scores of activists are clearing the path out of the thickets, showing new directions in familiar contestations.

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There is one final question I seek to answer in regards to this analysis. Namely, it is a question of the boundary between queer liberalism and the radical queer politics I’ve described above. Is there a limit at which queer politics loses its theoretical edge when entering into relations with the state, or formal politics? At what point does queer politics stop being queer? If we understand a queer vision of justice to be roughly bounded by notions of gender non-conformity, queer modes of life, queer expressions of the self and opposition to heteronormativity, homonationalism, patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and sexism, then can we ever sign on to a project which calls for anything less than revolution?

In Sarah Ahmed’s recent book, *The Promise of Happiness*, she explores the affective qualities of happiness through ‘Happy Objects,’ the ‘Feminist Killjoy,’ the ‘Unhappy Queer,’ and the ‘Melancholic Migrant.’ Her analysis identifies “Happy Families” as an affective object with complicated effects, “The happy family is both an object (something that affects us, something we are directed toward) and circulates through objects.”

Here, she describes the happy family as a site we are ‘directed towards,’ through popular culture, the media, our own families and friends, and as I have attempted to show, through neoliberal and homonormative policies. Additionally, objects can reflect the image of the happy family; think of photographs, images, representations, and physical objects that circulate feelings of happiness (a diamond ring, a picket fence, etc.). In her description of ‘Happy Families’ she captures many of the reasons why the same-sex marriage movement is the locus of politics for mainstream gay and lesbians. It is a site of potential happiness. It is a place in which you can become happy. By entering into marriage you have found a way outside of the alienation of being queer. When we
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begin to unravel our feelings about marriage and the family, it becomes clear why this site of contestation is so important to advocates, opponents and the state. Furthermore it highlights why queer visions of justice are disparagingly referred to as a politics of refusal.

She goes on to describe the ‘unhappy queer’ through an analysis of fiction, art, and popular culture. For her, the ‘unhappy queer’ is an affective object produced through cultural and political discourses in which there is no possibility for assimilation and acceptance. She notes that we can be ‘happily queer,’ in that, we can be satisfied in being a symbol of difference, of unhappiness, and of non-conformity. In her formulation the queer liberal subject becomes the ‘happy queer,’ the queer who assimilates and 

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into heteronormative modes of life; which leads her to question: “…can we sustain the struggle for recognition, the struggle to make the world more bearable for queers, without approximating the very forms of happy heterosexuality? What kinds of alternative kinship stories are possible, which are not organized by the desire for reproduction, or the desire to be like other families, or by the promise of happiness as “being like?” Do happy queer endings have to annul the political force and energy of the unhappy queer?”

From the perspective of affective theory, she is addressing the same question that I pose in terms of politics. If same-sex marriage represents a queer ‘happy ending’ after decades of struggling for recognition and fighting against the specter of HIV/AIDS, are there any forms of kinship which we ‘unhappy queers’ can adopt, free from heteronormativity or the increasing reach of the state?

This paper argues that we should look to new forms of queer alliances; coalitions, which call for broad forms of justice and the needs of healthcare, employment, housing, and worker’s rights. Neoliberal policies have encroached upon each of these areas and therefore they have

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35 Ibid, 114
become renewed sites of contention. These coalitions might, in the future, end up aligning more with queer liberalism—but in our present moment they offer the possibility of making life more bearable for people of difference, to allow space to happily be an unhappy queer. Furthermore, they offer us an invigorated field in which we can aspire towards queer and feminist visions of justice, outside of the unsatisfying politics of same-sex marriage.

Ahmed answers her question by looking to the etymology of the word aspiration, “We could remember that the Latin root of the word aspiration means “to breathe.” I think the struggle for a bearable life is the struggle for queers to have space to breathe…With breath comes imagination. With breath comes possibility. If queer politics is about freedom, it might simply mean the freedom to breathe.” Queer alliances offer us the opportunity to breathe new life into a politics that has been co-opted by the gay and lesbian citizen-subject. They offer us a way to change the conditions in which we live and connect communities of difference. As we aspire towards the unattainable queer future, we can perhaps find room to breathe within our present moment by rethinking how we organize, by reinvigorating the ideas of early gay and lesbian liberationists and feminists, and by re-envisioning the very ground on which we conduct our politics. We can strive for a politics of aspiration.

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36 Ibid, 115
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Queer Alliances
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