

# DESIRING CHANGE

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## DESIRING CHANGE

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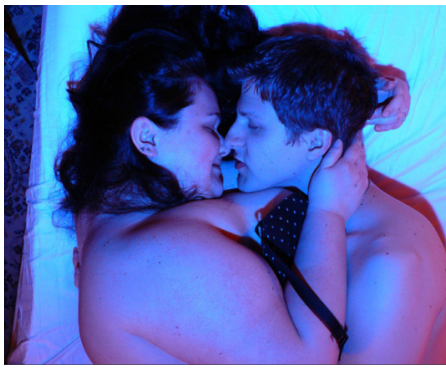
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# INTRODUCTION

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*“If our vision is built on more than rage against the oppressions we name, then it needs to embody those fragile, powerful components that make us human... it matters deeply that we claim the erotic, that we assert desire as a part of the centerpiece for freedom, for a new and better world... Finally, it is about all of us—in all the ways we are capable of being.”*

—Amber Hollibaugh, *The Price of Love*

The best defense of radical possibility in the United States is the creation of a powerful vision that can energize people by talking about our real and complicated lives. The Desiring Change project, which serves as the basis for this *New Feminist Solutions* report, is dedicated to enhancing our ability to name and claim uniquely gendered bodies and sexual desires; to amplifying our ability to connect movements for social justice across class and race; and to strengthening our power by helping to construct a movement that does not leave desire and gender outside the door. Through our theories, activism, and method, Desiring Change incorporates our various perceptions of desire and gender into alliance and action, weaving them into the very fabric of our struggle to change the world.

This report represents the integration of joint efforts by the Barnard Center for Research on Women (BCRW) and Queers for Economic Justice (QEJ), beginning with activist and academic covenings that took place from 2005-07 under the name “Desiring

Change.” The authors of this report, Amber Hollibaugh, Janet Jakobsen, and Catherine Sameh, are activists, academics, and organizers working at the BCRW and QEJ. They have interwoven the analysis produced by Desiring Change with the work of an intellectual project previously initiated by QEJ, called “A New Queer Agenda,” edited by Lisa Duggan, Joseph DeFilippis, Kenyon Farrow, and Richard Kim, which will be published in the 2011-2012 academic year in BCRW’s webjournal, *The Scholar & Feminist Online*. “A New Queer Agenda” was undertaken as a way to bring attention to the ideas and work of progressive queer activists working around the country, outside of the mainstream national LGBT organizations. Short excerpts of many of the essays in “A New Queer Agenda” are previewed in this report as examples of the kind of cross-issue organizing and vision advocated by Desiring Change.

The Desiring Change project was initially sponsored by BCRW and was born from the exhilarating potential and disappointing failures of an engaged and passionate politics at the beginning of the 21st century. Desiring Change was conceived in late 2005 as a multi-year, experimental project that would explore what tools organizers need to bring sex and gender issues to the center of their political agendas. The hope was to create new models for organizing that might support the coalitions needed to develop and maintain an agenda that provides alternative visions of sexual practice, gender, and

intimate life in the context of race and class in the U.S. Rather than approach sex and gender as single issues, separated or separable from progressive politics as a whole, we asked what would happen to the very methods of making social change if we infuse all of our activities with queerly comprehended perceptions of desire and gender. Organized by Amber Hollibaugh, Surina Khan, and Janet Jakobsen, Desiring Change held a series of meetings over three years, made up of different groups and activists at different times, which culminated in a daylong gathering in 2007.

We focused on the intersections between LGBTQ and progressive politics for a number of reasons. Through the first decade of the 21st century issues of gender and sexuality continued to roil mainstream politics in the United States in ways that not only undercut the ability of LGBTQ people to build sustainable lives and lifeworlds; gender and sexuality were also used to destabilize progressive possibilities on many other issues. As Lisa Duggan has shown in her book, *Twilight of Equality* (2003), political controversies over sexuality were, in part, a tactic of the Right that successfully accelerated the redistribution of wealth upward to the privileged few by undercutting funding for education and the arts and for organizations that promote economic and racial justice. At the same time, many queer movements pushed back by developing new ways to address key issues of concern to progressive

struggles. As this report documents, with respect to issues ranging from homelessness to immigration to violence, the creativity, passion, and experimental ways of being offered by these movements could be critical components of broader social change.

To prepare for the 2007 meeting, activist Surina Khan completed interviews with 21 organizations to assess the challenges of and possibilities for doing multi-issue and coalitional work. At this gathering, BCRW hosted individuals representing these 21 social justice organizations working at the nexus of race, class, gender, and sexuality. This meeting gave organizers the time and space to talk with each other about the perils and promise of maintaining a broad focus on social justice in their work and the difficulty of keeping a radical, sex-positive politics alive in activist work.

Desiring Change directly confronted the problem of sexual and gender oppression within the larger society, but also within progressive organizations. The organizations participating in the project were all committed to making connections across issues as crucial to both effective action and to their ability to respond holistically to their constituencies. Differences exist within any social group—whether of race or gender, sexuality or class, religion or citizenship, ability or disability—and the Desiring Change organizations did not want to ask people to leave some part of themselves aside in order to engage with their movements. Addressing issues and

constituencies holistically also allows for alliances that strengthen campaigns and open new possibilities. But, there are real difficulties in doing cross-issue work, and Desiring Change aimed to address these problems directly, bringing people together to share successes and frustrations and to create a space for innovation and experimentation.

Even with our starting point at the specific intersection between LGBTQ movements and broader progressive movements, the issues that we raised immediately became much broader. Many of the participants in the Desiring Change convening reported difficulties in developing alliance politics more generally. Why, they wondered, despite years of analysis about alliance politics, coalition politics, and intersections among differences, does much organizing remain focused on single issues? Why do even the most well-intentioned organizations and groups often seem to make the mistake of dropping some crucial axis of analysis and, thus, losing potential allies? To these questions, the Desiring Change organizers added: Why is sexuality, in particular, so often dropped from progressive organizing even as the political Right maintains a laser-like intensity on sex and gender?

When sex or race or class or gender disappears from our movements, it is not a simple mistake. Although mistakes and inattention are often problems in movements, it is not the case that if we had only attended more closely we would have kept it

all together. Although the shame associated with sexuality often pushes it aside in many discussions, it is not clear that more forthrightness about sex would resolve the matter. Rather, the Desiring Change project sees that the very assumptions we have about sex and gender or race and class structure our thoughts in such a way as to make these “mistakes” almost inevitable. We separate discussions of political issues about sexuality from questions of sexual practice, thus, effectively privatizing sex even as we try to address it publicly through policy. We associate sex and gender and we also associate race and class, thus giving primacy to each of those two intersections while undermining the intersections of sex and race and gender and class as they intersect.

Because these experiences of omission and silence are repeated over and over again, in movement setting after movement setting, they tell us that simply trying harder to pull together movements that have consistently proved unable to recognize differences within their own ranks or make stable connections across movements will not produce the desired result. *Rather, there’s something wrong with our basic approach.* Desiring Change seeks to examine how we have created the models for doing change work itself.

In 2009, BCRW joined forces with Queers for Economic Justice to extend Desiring Change as a joint project, including “A New Queer Agenda.” “A New Queer Agenda” draws together essays from the



intellectuals and activists who are currently doing some of the most innovative and exciting queer work today. Each contributor outlines not just the most important work being done on these issues, but also the vision that drives their organizing. As people who have dedicated their working lives to social justice, what world do they want to make, what change do they desire?

This report is born of the fact that in the current political moment, particularly after the financial

crisis of 2008, both BCRW and QEJ see an opportunity to bring fresh vision to questions that have long challenged organizations and movements, questions about how to frame issues of key concern and how to develop effective models for making change. We also see a longing for new possibilities: for a way forward in the face of increasing inequality and for a means of keeping our desires at the center of our politics.

# WHY DESIRE? WHY CHANGE? WHY NOW?

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The Desiring Change project is driven by hope and by desire. The participants are mostly longtime intellectuals and activists who have devoted their lives to building social justice, and now find the conditions in the early years of a new century to be particularly challenging. The heady days of justice seeking—of movement and change on behalf of racial and economic justice, sexual liberation, and an end to oppression and violence—have shifted into a defensive mode. Even as movements scramble to defend basic rights, like the right to bodily integrity, positive gains are few and far between and often focus on benefits that might help some individuals but will not fundamentally change conditions.

The participants in Desiring Change and the organizations that support this project, the Barnard Center for Research on Women and Queers for Economic Justice, hope for something more. They desire a different kind of social world, where economic security is possible for all people, where health care is available to all, and all people's relational lives and family structures are recognized and supported. To realize this vision our hope is that sexuality, desire, and the possibility of the erotic become key engines in the mission of organizers working on a range of issues: at the intersections of street economies and sex workers rights, of labor organizing and immigration, or for disability access and reproductive justice.

## Building Connections, Building Movements

We begin with a discussion of how issues are actually connected. Such connections among issues are often asserted, particularly in the face of exclusion, where people who might see themselves as part of a particular group or movement are left out (whether actively or inadvertently). Here, we set out to take the next step beyond demands for connection and inclusion, exploring the possible bases for working together.

The connections between queer lives and a broad range of issues follow a number of different lines, ultimately creating a dense latticework of inter-relation. There are different points of inter-connection from which lines run in multiple directions. As we can see in right-wing politics, for example, conservative efforts to increase inequality and extend the marginalization of different communities often use efforts that are interconnected. Conservative campaigns to cut back on government support for those in need, to intensify the policing of communities of color, or to refuse LGBTQ rights may all use the same images of those who are deviant and undeserving because of their inability or refusal to develop families that match the mythical norm of mother, father and 2.5 children. Exploring the connectedness of right-wing strategies

can serve as a clear indicator of the need for linked work among progressives and can also expand our understanding of how to make these connections. Similarly, there are structural points of connection between issues—the ways in which the State focuses on documentation as a means of policing both gender identity and immigration, or the

explored. In particular, the desire for justice, shared across movements, can provide the motivating force for new types of inter-relation.

In the following sections, we explore these different connections and the overarching systems in which they are embedded so as to provide the basis for larger and more effective movements for justice,

“THE PARTICIPANTS IN DESIRING CHANGE AND THE ORGANIZATIONS THAT SUPPORT THIS PROJECT ... DESIRE A DIFFERENT KIND OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN WHICH NOT ONLY ARE SOME INDIVIDUAL PEOPLE ABLE TO MOVE OUT OF POVERTY, BUT ECONOMIC SECURITY IS POSSIBLE FOR ALL PEOPLE; IN WHICH NOT ONLY CAN SOME PEOPLE GAIN ACCESS TO HEALTH INSURANCE BUT HEALTHCARE IS AVAILABLE TO ALL; IN WHICH NOT ONLY CAN GAY PEOPLE WHO SO DESIRE GET MARRIED, BUT ALL PEOPLE'S RELATIONAL LIVES AND FAMILY STRUCTURES ARE RECOGNIZED AND SUPPORTED.”

ways in which failures in our health care system undercut economic security for those whose jobs do not provide for paid sick leave. These structural intertwinings are points at which larger systems are brought to bear on the lives of individuals. Recognizing these structural connections can provide a means of building alliances around specific issues like health care reform.

Perhaps even more powerfully, relationships among movements can be built through a holistic vision that promotes the well being of all people. The ways in which different movements contribute to this overarching possibility are full of potential but rarely

equity, and the flourishing of all. Building out from the intersection of LGBTQ and broader progressive politics we illuminate some of the relationships among gender, race, sex, class, immigration, and economics.

### Direct connections among social movements

As the “culture wars” over issues like sexuality wax and wane, shifting back and forth from white hot to cold war, it is important to remember that many social issues not generally associated with gender and sexuality are actually organized around these terms.

As Debanuj DasGupta points out in “A New Queer Agenda,” “Immigration laws in the United States are largely based on two policy priorities: the reunification of ‘families,’ and ‘merit.’ Family ties are defined on the basis of the heterosexual nuclear family, leaving LGBT households and relationships largely outside the protection of immigration law.” It is striking that a policy determining national citizenship should be organized around sexual and familial arrangements, and yet the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services of the Department of Homeland Security has the right to enforce the order of preference for relatives who might immigrate to “reunite a family,” an order that presumes the heterosexual nuclear family as the immediate unit, followed by a hierarchical list of more distant relatives (USCIS website <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/>). As DasGupta argues, adding gay and lesbian partners to the circle of the immediate family does not change the enforcement of a narrow vision of family through immigration law, nor does it shift the ways in which the very idea of citizenship is dependent on the presumption of the nuclear family as the basic unit of society.

This family structure is also presumed to be middle-class, a presumption enforced through income requirements associated with immigration. DasGupta continues: “U.S. immigration law, following the passage of Immigration Reform in 1996, requires a high income level for the U.S. citizen or Green card holder who is seeking to sponsor a ‘spouse’ or ‘family relative.’ Additionally, the sponsoring person is held

responsible for all economic needs in case of illness or unemployment of the person they are sponsoring.” This legal requirement for economic responsibility means not only that a particular family form is central to U.S. immigration policy, but also that there are even fewer social supports outside of the family for immigrants than for other Americans. The difficulties of isolating the nuclear family—away from both social supports and opportunities to freely pursue alternative family forms—are thereby intensified for immigrants.

In response, in 2007, QEJ developed a Queer and Transgender Statement on Immigration Reform (available at: <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/change>), which argued “for the recognition of flexible kinship and friendship networks within which LGBT immigrants live and work,” rather than privileging conjugal couples generally, whether straight or gay, as the locus of immigration benefits: “The Vision statement process was an exercise in cross movement organizing, helping to push the LGBT rights movement to broaden its conception of immigrant rights and pressing the immigrant rights movement toward a more progressive, humane, non-heteronormative vision of immigration reform. It helped us identify progressive allies from the two movements on issues of LGBT immigrants.” In making the link between queer movements and immigration struggles, QEJ and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), another grassroots group working at the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, and class, show how the regulation and targeting of non-normative

gendered bodies and racialized bodies through the Real ID Act, a War on Terror initiative, are the grounds for solidarity among seemingly disparate populations. Gender queers and immigrants are both subject to policing by the State and, more informally, by citizens through street harassment and violence; by working together, these communities can challenge their exclusion from real and symbolic citizenship.

As with immigration, economic issues are also interlaced with sexuality. One of the most profound examples of this conjoined strategy for undermining the possibility of justice, or even basic fairness, is the conservative campaign for “welfare reform,” that culminated in the passage of the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act” in 1996. In “A New Queer Agenda,” Joseph DeFilippis has detailed this history in order to show that moral panics around sexuality are both parallel to and part and parcel of attacks on those who are impoverished. In particular, this campaign to cut back on State support for the poor, under the guise of “welfare reform,” depended on common stereotypes about LGBTQ and poor people as non-normative with respect to family life. DeFilippis shows that these stereotypes include the idea that both queerness and poverty are the result of bad “lifestyle choices.” Sexual behavior is both the symbol and site of these bad choices. “Teenage mothers” in need of social support are seen as suffering not from poverty but from bad sexual choices, and this stereotype is used to legitimate

policies that regulate the bodies of those who cannot afford the “freedom” of choice that is supposed to be offered by both capitalism and American democracy. As DeFilippis says, “The Right has been very clear about determining what kind of family is entitled to government aid, and LGBT people must realize that we are placed with poor single mothers on the ‘undeserving’ side in this equation.” In particular, even as the 1996 “welfare reform” act cut back on aid to the supposedly inappropriate families of the poor, conservatives in Congress were also working to provide tax breaks to middle-class families that fit the conservative ideal of a “traditional family,” especially those with stay-at-home mothers. In other words, conservative Congressional representatives were willing to punish poor women who cared for their children and didn’t work outside the home while supporting middle-class women who were engaged in the exact same activity—staying at home and caring for children. Most importantly, “welfare reform” and conjoined anti-queer and anti-poor strategies laid the groundwork for many of the battles between 1996 and today. The government has generously funded “abstinence only” sex education and marriage promotion, even as it has further cut government programs that place increasing pressure on basic issues of survival for many people. The wave of cutting programs and services is now threatening middle-class families as Social Security and Medicare are proposed as sites for further cuts.

## Common Vulnerability and the Neoliberal Economic System

The economic crisis that began in 2008 and that continues in the form of high unemployment and constrained possibility is the leading edge of economic shifts that have for the past several decades increased the vulnerability of working people in the United States and around the world. These common vulnerabilities are potential sites for alliance, but they can also be exploited to divide groups. Clearly articulating the connections between individual lives and broader economic realities can help us to build a scaffolding of connection and to resist divisions among those whose interests and values might be actively aligned.

Queer people are often among the most vulnerable in any group or community. Queer people are particularly vulnerable around economic issues. Without adequate housing, health care, employment, old age provisions, and other protections from the State, many queer people are falling deeper into economic marginalization. For instance, queer youth may be kicked out of their homes by parents and families that refuse to accept them; they may find their homes to be places of violence and danger, determining it better to face the risks of the street than to face the certain violence of the domestic space. Then, once on the street their sexual or gender identities may make them particular targets of harassment and refusal of services. Similarly, at the other end of the age spectrum, a lifetime of employment discrimination or of choosing to take jobs “below the

radar” because you cannot pass as a heterosexual in a traditional workplace or so you are freer to live a queer life, may leave queer elders without the economic resources to provide for themselves in retirement or when no longer physically able to work. These vulnerabilities are intensified in the current climate.

As Lisa Duggan discusses directly in “A New Queer Agenda,” even before the economic crisis those fighting for economic justice were particularly concerned with shifts in the economy that intensified vulnerabilities. These shifts included reductions in the provision of a social safety net as government services were moved into the private sphere, so that only those with the individual means to pay might receive these services. This relation between reduced government services and an increased focus on for-profit corporations as the source of what were once thought of as “public goods” is what political theorists call “neoliberal privatization.”

Perhaps most importantly for the Desiring Change project, the privatization that is the hallmark of a neoliberal system of political economy depends on services that are provided by families. Even for the very wealthy, these services are provided in the context of families, although the wealthy purchase the services they need, which are provided by someone working for a wage. For example, health care practices have changed so as to shorten hospital stays and send people home to the care of their families as quickly as humanly possible. Women and children are sent home almost immediately after giving birth and catastrophic injuries that used to





involve months of hospitalization are now limited to weeks. Who provides the care that used to be provided by hospitals? The expectation is that families will do so.

The burden on families of these increased expectations for care can be extreme. People often have to quit their jobs in order to care for family members who are ill or injured. These burdens and attendant vulnerabilities are only increased for those who—for whatever reason—do not have a “family” to fall back on. Even if one has lived in a traditional family and remained married for a lifetime, the loss of a spouse may produce intense vulnerability, unless one’s children can take on new responsibilities of care with only the help they can buy. But, for the people with whom QEJ works, the chances that such middle-class or wealthy relatives are ready to help us when in need are not likely. And, with the full embrace of privatization, our society has said that these problems are the individual’s to solve. As a result, the dismantling of our social safety net and the intensification of privatization disproportionately affect low-income, working-class, elderly, and young queers, and queers of color.

Queer people need economic justice because they are not likely to have the private means to provide for all of life’s (expected and unexpected) needs. Yet the vision of Desiring Change is not just focused on queer people, because the burdens of privatization can be intense for anyone—for the new mother who must return home and care for her infant child while still recovering herself, for the family who must find schooling for their children

when the public school system is underfunded and often unsafe, for the individuals who must choose between their jobs and caring for family members. Desiring Change is dedicated to making positive connections between these struggles and the lives of queer and trans people who have created nonfamilial systems of support.

And here we see the intersection between the broad system of neoliberal political economy and the personal desires and relations that are (thought to be) the appropriate subject of queer politics. In particular, the labor done within the context of families is crucial to the neoliberal economic system as a whole. Thus, certain gains have been possible under neoliberalism—gay marriage in at least some states and perhaps one day at the federal level. For neoliberals, it doesn't necessarily matter who it is who gets married, so long as someone does. And whether or not these marriages “survive” is also of little concern, because the burden placed on people through privatization is no longer a matter of public concern. Individuals will have to find a way to endure these burdens themselves—privately. A neoliberal government has no concern for the bits and pieces of broken relationships; what matters is that some individuals be identified as personally responsible for the care of others. So, for example, the State will require mothers to name the biological fathers of their children even if these men are not available or are abusive. And the State will pursue these men for child support, even if doing so delays the actual provision of support for the child. Whether this child—or anyone—suffers is not

the primary question in a neoliberal system. Once that question is answered, even if suffering ensues because the named party cannot or will not be of assistance, the State is no longer concerned. Whether women have to stay with abusive husbands or partners, whether children need health care or food, whether they can get into a school that will provide a good education—the government takes no responsibility for these outcomes.

Just as goods and services are privatized in this system, the negative consequences of the system are often felt in an intensely personal and private form, whether in the exhaustion of personally providing care that might be socially provided, the pain of broken relations that couldn't stand the strain, or the trauma of staying in an abusive relationship simply for the sake of survival. Desiring Change takes these negative consequences seriously and sets them in the light of alternative social possibilities.

## Queer possibilities for alternative family

Queer people have developed these alternative possibilities as they have built all kinds of relationships that meet both needs and desire. These creative responses provide another means of building connections across issues, as, for example, health care, economics, and sexuality all come together at the nexus of caring labor and so-called “private life.” One extraordinary example of this is the response in queer communities to the AIDS epidemic, which exploded in the early 1980s and



## NEOLIBERAL PRIVATIZATION

Neoliberal privatization is a shift away from what has been known as the “welfare state.” As the name suggests, in a welfare state, certain goods are considered to be public goods that should be available to all: education, health, and housing. Furthermore, a welfare state establishes a minimum wage, thereby setting a limit to the labor market where companies compete to offer the lowest wage that workers will take.

Since the late 1970s or early 1980s (different scholars place the exact date of the shift at different points), the United States and other industrialized nations have moved away from this system in which the government in principle ensures the basic welfare of its citizens, within a market-based economic system (although nowhere did the State

provide for holistic well being). Neoliberals argue that the marketplace is the most efficient way to organize all social and economic relations, making neoliberalism a decisive shift away from the welfare state. The social safety net—constructed in the United States through programs like Social Security, Medicare, unemployment insurance, and the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children—has been consistently under attack and taken apart piece by piece. In 1996, for example, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, was ended through a bill known as “welfare reform,” and replaced by block grants to states. And the states, in turn, reduced eligibility for assistance and increased work requirements even for those people who were in school or who were solely responsible for childcare or eldercare.

As the social safety net was being dismantled, other goods that the government had provided for decades and in some cases for centuries were being moved out of the State and into the realm of private corporations. The government had long provided a system of hospitals and schools, because it was thought that what these systems provided were goods and services of value to the society as a whole. A well-educated population was a benefit not just to the individuals who were educated but also to the society that benefited from their knowledge and skill as both workers and citizens. Now, however, the public school and public hospital systems—along with many other government systems, including the criminal justice system—are being moved under the aegis of for-profit corporations. This move to privatize formerly public goods and services has serious implications for the well being of most of us in the United States. Only those with the personal wealth to purchase all kinds of services—private schooling for their children and “Cadillac” health care plans for themselves—are not hampered by privatization.

which the United States government refused to address. Informal community and family structures have existed throughout time in queer worlds but the epidemic forced queer and poor communities to construct care giving and caretaking structures not based on blood or birth communities. LGBTQ people had to begin to fight for new supports that could legally recognize their struggles and begin to meet the devastating demands of a crisis of that proportion.

Moreover, this creative relationship-building provides a point of connection between queer relationships and all kinds of families. Desiring Change suggests that the heterosexual single mother raising her children, or the post-divorce blended family, or the married heterosexual couple living without children are not so different from relations that are acknowledged as queer. Terry Boggis, the Director of Center Kids, Center Families (a program of the LGBTQ Community Center in New York City) describes in “A New Queer Agenda,” all different kinds of families: gay men and lesbians who desire marriage, people in platonic relationships who desire to raise children, and adults who help raise children to whom they are not officially related (through either blood or marriage or partnership). Boggis highlights these different types of families because of the likelihood that they will be “left behind,” their needs ignored, as same-sex marriage moves to center stage. Indeed, there are many

families in many different forms that are not seen as “queer,” that are also left behind by the focus on marriage. Government at virtually all levels, from federal to local, supports marriage through tax breaks and other incentives, but if one is not in a marriage these benefits are not available, even if one is struggling.

Alternatively, the supports for relational life that are now focused on the singular relation of marriage could instead be provided democratically. As Boggis says, “Only approximately 25% of U.S. households are now comprised of a mother, father, and kids. The majority are single parent households, grandparents raising kids or other kinship care arrangements, adults living alone, BFFs, friends with benefits, multiple generation households, extended families, all those families . . . and more that none of us can imagine . . . [H]ow would I like to see these new families protected? I’d like to see proactive legislation that allows individuals, LGBT or not, to name those nearest and dearest—sisters or brothers, nieces or nephews, domestic partners or BFFs—as their Social Security beneficiaries. In fact, I’d like all 1,000+ benefits presently attached to civil marriage to go to the people we determine and select, not only to spouses. In other words, I’d like to see federal legislation that is designed to deliver benefits and rights based on my personhood rather than whether or not I’ve been a winner in the dating game.”

The QEJ “Beyond Same Sex Marriage” statement, signed by over 250 activists, educators, writers, scholars, journalists, artists, community organizers, and lawyers, including many involved in *Desiring Change*, clearly articulates this alternative vision. In circulation since 2006, the statement says:

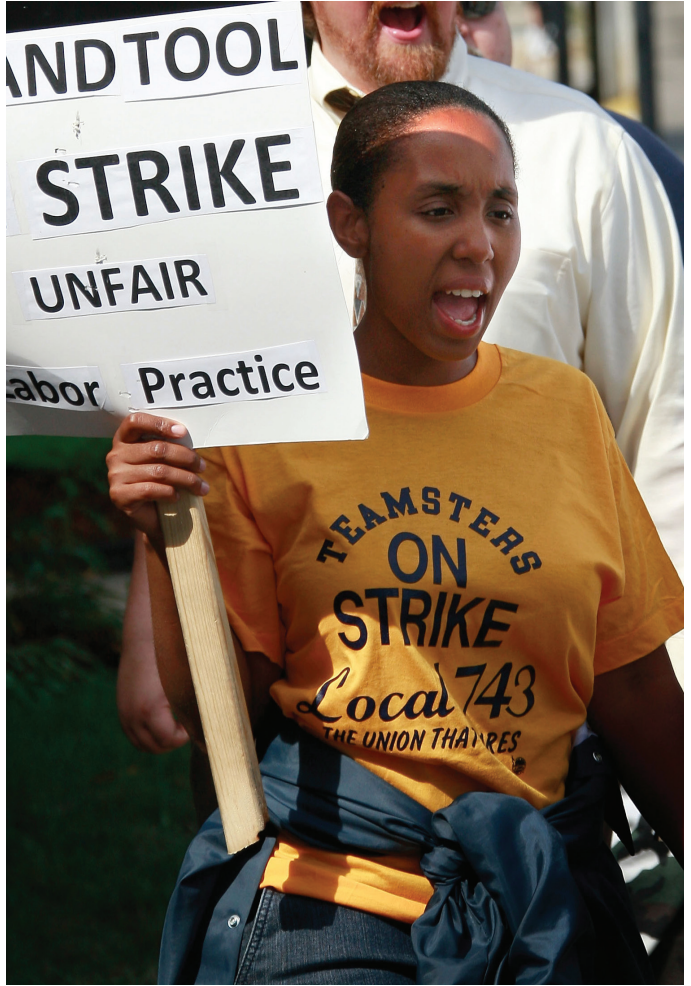
We seek access to a flexible set of economic benefits and options regardless of sexual orientation, race, gender/gender identity, class, or citizenship status. We reflect and honor the diverse ways in which people find and practice love, form relationships, create communities and networks of caring and support, establish households, bring families into being, and build innovative structures to support and sustain community. (<http://q4ej.org/beyond-marriage-full-statement>)

The statement acknowledges that most people are living outside of nuclear families, and articulates an inclusive and holistic vision of support and care for all people.

Recognizing and supporting the range of people’s values in building their relational lives has been termed “sexual democracy” by Lisa Duggan. The basic ideals of democracy, freedom, and equality hold that people should be free to build lives under conditions of liberty and fairness, and to pursue happiness as they define it. This idea is rarely applied to sexuality or relational life, where prescriptive (and proscriptive) values often guide public policy.

## The positive connections created by a desire for justice

The connections between queer politics and the full range of justice issues are not just the moral panics of right-wing attack; they are also the warp and weave that run through the fabric of social justice. Positive connections can be developed through the shared values of movements for change. In “A New Queer Agenda,” Richard Blum makes a powerful argument for the connection between freedom and equality. These issues are often separated in both progressive and conservative movements—where conservatives promote freedom even if the particular form of freedom favored is costly to equality, and progressives promote equality and are suspicious of the libertarian valences of freedom. Given these traditional divisions, queers, who live in desperate need of both freedom and equality, once again fall outside the bounds of political argument. Blum points out that economic security and material equality are, however, necessary pre-requisites to the ability to live freely—to be open about one’s life and to pursue that life without fear of economic reprisal. Moreover, he makes the even more radical point that equal rights in the workplace are not enough to ensure the type of freedom associated with justice. While the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of sexual or gender identity is crucial, such rights do not necessarily provide power in the workplace or the support to act freely: “In



short, if queer workers need a measure of economic security to live their lives openly and freely, the queer movement needs to join the battles over power in the workplace.” Blum details successful campaigns where queer organizers have been able to join with struggles for workers’ power, including collective bargaining and the right to organize. Joint campaigns between Pride at Work! and the union UNITE HERE, and queer support for popular protests in defense of state workers in Wisconsin, demonstrate the possibility

of connections between the struggle for economic and sexual justice. The links between material well being and queer freedom are being made in some contemporary movements.

Organizing can also join groups together in moving toward an overarching vision of possibility. As Robert McRuer argues in “A New Queer Agenda,” there are important affinities that articulate disability and queer politics. McRuer uses the concept of “crip” activism, disability activism that goes beyond notions of simple



inclusion and challenges the way society is structured. “Most important, queer and crip activists share a will to remake the world, given the ways in which injustice, oppression, and hierarchy are built (sometimes quite literally) into the structures of contemporary society...For crip activists, the will to remake the world manifests itself in numerous ways...[T]hrough a mixture of flamboyant anger and camp humor, [crip activism], like many queer interventions over the past few decades, pushes toward more expansive public

cultures.” One of the main connections between activism for disability and sexual justice is recognition of the way that social relations are materialized through individual bodies, and how parts of the social world are closed to many different people because of the way they inhabit their bodies. Such connections are particularly vibrant when they fuel the kinds of passionate activism that enlarge our possibilities, our lives, and our worlds. Desiring Change seeks to provide models for realizing such an expansive and enlivening vision of justice.

# QUEER FUTURES

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## New Models, New Possibilities

*Even today, 30 years after the beginning of the LGBT movement, the cost of being both working-class and queer is dangerously high. Your workplace community is based on this truth: in a majority of jobs, people need to be able to rely on each other. Ideas like solidarity and workplace organizing flow from that simple recognition. When you work in a hospital or at a plant, when you serve people or care for them, when your job means that others depend on you, you in turn depend on co-workers who share your responsibilities and tasks. If those people hate and despise you, if they think there is something fundamentally tainted and repulsive about who you are and who you love, they can make your workplace a site of hellish despair. And if others in similar jobs and circumstances conspire to hurt and isolate you, you're in serious danger. You know that no one has your back, no one will come to your rescue when you need help or support.*

—Amber Hollibaugh, *The Price of Love*

Desiring Change explores the possibilities created when we begin at the intersections, with those doing work across issues. By starting at the points at which issues come together, we hope to avoid finding ourselves in a position where differences among those who are marginalized are used to break down relationships that might otherwise form the basis for solidarity. As the above passage, written by Amber Hollibaugh a few years ago for a labor journal, shows, sexuality and desire can unravel collective bonds. Too often workplace and other

kinds of solidarity are built on the assumption that most people live normative, i.e., heterosexual and gender “appropriate,” lives. Queer sexualities and gender expressions are seen as undermining the already fragile sense of security many working-class people have. But what would the world look like if the forces of desire and longing, and the ecstasy, danger, and power of sex and gender expression were used to amplify rather than undermine working-class and cross-class solidarity? What if erotic pleasure and affirmation were brought to the forefront of social justice movements, not repudiated or buried?

By using an intersectional framing, we can embed the different aspects and cross points into the structure of our understandings and the ways that we do our organizing. For example, one way to understand the work done by Desiring Change participants like Gen5 (Generation Five), South Asian Network (SAN), and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, would be to see their activities as divided among very separate issues: Gen5 is dedicated to ending child sexual abuse within five generations; SAN “was founded in 1990 to provide an open forum for people of South Asian origin to gather and discuss social, economic, and political issues affecting the community, with the goal of raising awareness, engagement and advocacy among community members leading to an empowered and active community”; and SRLP “works to

guarantee that all people are free to self-determine their gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race, and without facing harassment, discrimination, or violence.” Yet, despite their different areas of focus and the different communities with which they work, all of these organizations have found it necessary to address questions of violence and to do so in ways that also recognize the vulnerability of communities. Gen5’s understanding of transformative justice means a community-driven notion of combating child sexual abuse that addresses perpetrators directly so as not to intensify the focus of the criminal justice system—and the State violence that this system involves—on vulnerable communities. Similarly, SAN uses a model of transformative justice to confront violence coming from outside of and within the community. SAN brings perpetrators into the community to humanize the issues that lead to violence, while also educating men in the community about gender violence. For SRLP, this type of transformative justice leads the organization to make connections between the ways in which both transgendered people and immigrants are policed by the State, particularly with regard to initiatives that target undocumented workers and anyone whose gender identity does not match their ID documents. In each of these cases, child sexual abuse, street violence, and state policing, the organizing is strengthened by making connections among

“WHAT IF EROTIC PLEASURE AND AFFIRMATION WERE BROUGHT TO THE FOREFRONT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS, NOT REPUDIATED OR BURIED?”

different forms of violence—such as the connections between the State-based violence of policing and the extra-legal violence of hate crimes—so that attempts to end one form of violence don’t lead to intensifications of other forms. Similarly, seeing connections in forms of violence across communities can lead to connections across movements—between, for example, movements for immigrant rights and transgender rights or for a more radical critique of hate crimes and sexual abuse.

Most of the organizations that undertake this innovative organizing are small and underfunded. In fact, many of the difficulties identified by participants in Desiring Change stem from the epidemic underfunding of grassroots organizations and the subsequent inability of those organizations to do the kind of interconnected work such funding might allow. In the survey of organizations conducted before the 2007 Desiring Change meeting, many groups reported underfunding as the primary driving force behind a single-issue focus. But the problem is not merely a lack of dollars; it is also that movements and organizations don’t have



models for bringing gender, sexuality, and desire in alignment with their organizing on issues of race and class. Without the time and space to experiment with new ways of organizing and thinking across these intersections, people and groups reproduce the kinds of old models that have historically failed.

The hope is that this experimentation can lead to new possibilities. For example, Southerners on New Ground (SONG) is one group working on issues of race and class by using a sex and gender framework. SONG envisions a sustainable South that works towards the transformation of economic, social, spiritual, and political relationships. Although they face the difficulties of funding innovative work, they remain committed to creative forms of organizing that can lay the groundwork for the relationships necessary to make connections across issues. As Caitlin Breedlove, Co-Director of SONG, relates in response to questions posed for *Desiring Change*:

In poorly funded communities, we can often take more risks in strategy and how we do the work generally, because we do not have a relationship with funding that dictates how we do the work or what it looks like. Therefore, innovative models that challenge the status quo emerge all the time in our work. As LGBTQ people, some of our SONG work in places like Durham, NC is not funded much by SONG regional. Therefore they do not feel restricted about being open to the idea that LGBTQ

communities should be open to talking about sexuality, desire, sex work realities, the intense failure of capitalism, and the need to build new infrastructure. This is seen as “too edgy” by some funders. Additionally, it gives us the opportunity to respond with whatever strategies different communities need at different times, as long as these strategies are within our ethics and framework. For example, funders may think that listening sessions, digital storytelling, and monthly potlucks are not “outcome-driven work.” However, in many communities we work in, the “phase” of this work **MUST** come first, because we are simply not able to move forward with communities without long and on-going relationship-building phases. So, we can also do things like “queer people of color community gardens” or “community-based health care” in addition to fighting campaigns, because that is what is needed.

New face-to-face relationships are a crucial building block for more inclusive movements. And new connections between advocacy and social services are rich in potential. One of the largest constraints of the contemporary funding system is that funding for services is often disconnected from funding for advocacy. Yet, if one of the central points of connection between LGBTQ politics and other progressive issues is privatization and the attendant vulnerability of multiple communities, one

means of addressing privatization is to connect social service to advocacy. As privatization places more strain on personal relationships, the need for social services increases—even as the services provided by the State decrease. Community groups have stepped into this gap to take up more of the work of providing services. This shift from government provision to demand on individual relationships and community agencies can also require a shift in resources from advocacy to services. If, however, advocacy and service provision become integral parts of one another, then organizers and organizations can actually strengthen their projects as one part of the work feeds the other.

The connections that can be built between the provision of social services and the construction of vibrant movements are exemplified in QEJ's shelter project, directed by Jay Toole. Activist Aine Duggan has written a profile of Jay for "A New Queer Agenda" that documents how the shelter project has provided remarkably successful support groups and direct services for queer people in the shelter system. Some of the needs that participants articulated within the support groups could be addressed through policy change and the shelter project has pursued these changes. Through "a protracted process that involved building a coalition with a small group of other LGBT organizations, securing the public support of many other LGBT organizations, meeting with directors and staff at

numerous shelters, [and] meeting with the Mayor's administration repeatedly, [Jay's efforts] eventually resulted in the piloting of a transgender policy that provides homeless individuals of trans experience the right to self-determine placement through either the men's or women's side of the shelter system... This [is] an example of creating a campaign about an aspect of queer poverty and facilitating its development to include some of the mainstream queer organizations."

The method of connecting the needs of participants in QEJ's shelter support groups to the work of mainstream gay organizations was also successful in expanding New York City's domestic partnership laws to cover people in shelters. As Aine Duggan writes:

QEJ had a major victory with regard to homeless domestic partners. In 2007, QEJ and collaborating organizations celebrated when New York City's Department of Homeless Services (DHS) finally changed its policy, allowing couples registered as domestic partners to secure emergency shelter as families in the same way as married couples... This victory was the result of long months of hard work. For over two years, QEJ led a coalition of organizations to work on this issue—work that would never have had to be done if, over a decade earlier, gay activists had thought to include the Department of Homeless Services on the list of city agencies covered



by the Domestic Partnership laws they were then creating. But at the time that the historic Domestic Partnerships were being created in NYC, homelessness was forgotten (as it all too often is by the LGBT community), so QEJ had to work for years to get DHS to be added to a law that had already governed other city agencies for years.

This final point, about the way that a policy applicable to a broad range of people—gay and straight, across lines of race and class—could have been written to take homeless people into account is crucial.

Connecting service-provision and advocacy can

also change both the efficacy of services and how they are provided. As Reed Christian and Anya Mukarji-Connolly point out in “A New Queer Agenda,” in discussing the needs and desires of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQQ) homeless youth, how services are provided is a key to whether those efforts are effective. Christian and Mukarji-Connolly contrast a model based on individual pathology with one based on social accountability. They are concerned that service-providers too frequently fail to address LGBTQQ youth themselves, and instead just focus on problems that are broken out of a

social context and understood in the framework of pathology. Rather than focusing on young people's problems, which can easily slide into the idea of young people as problems, service-provision can focus on the people involved, and, in turn, they can become part of creating the change that will improve their lives:

There are grassroots efforts not only to improve the lives of low-income LGBTQQ individuals, but to create authentic leadership among the most vulnerable members of the community... There are a number of local grassroots organizations that are rethinking the traditional non-profit and social service models... They are breaking down traditional hierarchical models and replacing them with transparent decision making processes or collective models. They are committed to a world where all people have access to life's basic needs, where all are empowered to make change, and where everyone is able to live and love freely and safely. Together, we are working hard to change the landscape.

When those most directly involved in an issue are understood to be potential agents of change, then providing services and enabling advocacy can be woven together for more effective overall action.

This starting point can also help to build new and unexpected alliances. The New York grassroots group FIERCE (Fabulous, Independent,

Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment) has challenged the ways in which moral panic about drugs and prostitution within the upper-class (queer and straight) white community of the West Village led to increased gentrification and policing of trans and queer youth of color. Organized by the queer and trans youth who frequent the public spaces of the West Village, FIERCE campaigns have successfully illustrated how punishing "transgressive" behaviors is often the linchpin of economic practices and policies. In "A New Queer Agenda," Rickke Mananzala details the fight against the unequal development of the Christopher Street Pier and Hudson River Park. FIERCE was "founded in 2000 by a group of primarily LGBTQ youth of color who were collectively witnessing the deterioration of access to public spaces and aggressive policing practices in the West Village," and was able to turn a campaign against gentrification into a campaign for widespread public access to the piers. Private development in conjunction with aggressive police harassment of the youth who frequented the piers narrowed the range of people who might use this public space that was supposedly open to all. In response:

[FIERCE] launched the Our S.P.O.T. (Safe Place for Organizing Together) Campaign, which calls for the inclusion of a 24-hour LGBTQ youth center and other community-friendly uses, such as schools and athletic



## INTERSECTIONALITY

The term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), a feminist and critical race legal theorist, who argued that the location of African-American women within intersecting systems of racism and sexism necessitated a different analysis of and political solution to domestic violence than mainstream feminism offered. For instance, the historic racism of the police towards the African-American community meant that African-American women could not rely on the police for protection from domestic violence. Additionally, pressure from African-American men to protect their communities from racism by not airing any “dirty laundry” put extra constraints on African-American women. Intersectionality offers an analysis of the ways in which the structures of racism, economic inequality, gender, and sexuality intersect to shape one’s experience of oppression and resistance.

While Crenshaw put the term intersectionality into the feminist

lexicon, earlier women of color scholars and activists were using similar concepts in their work. The Combahee River Collective (1977), a group of African-American lesbian activists, argued:

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.

The Collective’s analysis came out of their work in multiple movements, where women were taking the lead as organizers, but which weren’t identified as locations of feminism because of the racism and middle-class bias of mainstream feminism:

The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World, and working people. We are of course particularly committed to working on those struggles in which race, sex, and class are simultaneous factors in oppression.

Intersectionality has been a useful framework for thinking about the ways that gender difference, sexuality, and desire are deeply embedded within economic and political life. Rather than peripheral “lifestyle” issues of personal practice or longing, sexual and intimate life are organized, in part, through the constraints and possibilities of economic life. For instance, the argument that gay marriage would advance equality by conferring the same material benefits on gay couples that it does on straight couples recognizes that economic imperatives deeply shape intimate life. An intersectional analysis draws out these connections and makes clear the need for a broad-based political movement that brings sexual and intimate life to the forefront of its agenda and vision.

fields, in any future development on Pier 40... [providing an] example of the possibilities of collective ownership of public space and our rightful claim to a stake in community development...We helped to lead a diverse chorus of voices against private development on Pier 40 and, through that major victory, we have gained a large base of support for the LGBTQ youth center from residents.

The key to building such a diverse campaign was the empowerment of the local youth as agents of change. Starting with their vision for how the piers might be used enabled a policy initiative that positioned them as the subjects of public policy, rather than merely the objects or recipients of service. These young queer people were now part of the “public” that might use the piers, while their efforts were successful because they linked their right to the public domain and their call for a youth center to goods for other people, as well: a school and athletic fields are for the good of all.

The question posed by FIERCE in this campaign—Who belongs to the public? And more specifically, do queer people belong to the public?—raises perhaps the central difficulty with developing a movement that can be fully inclusive of gender and sexuality. For many people, the idea of sharing a public space or a public agenda with queer and transgender people is difficult simply to imagine, much less to inhabit. Grassroots group Intersections/Intersecciones founder, Lisa

Weiner-Mahfuz, discusses the need to create broad and lasting social justice based on the premise that fully inclusive organizations that collaborate and share a common vision are poised to power movements forward. In response to questions posed by *Desiring Change*, Weiner-Mahfuz says that one way to ground these collaborations is to recognize the ways in which our very bodies are sites of possibility:

[A]cross movements we resist/fear centering the body—centering complex and marginalized bodies—in the work. If we can’t talk about and organize around bodies in the most complex ways we can’t talk about/organize around sex/sexuality/desire. Questions of the body, sex and desire, influence my work every day. The body is a prime location for targeting, oppression and marginalization. I work with communities that experience this inside their bodies every minute of every day. Yet I also find that there is a deep desire to talk about and generate strategies for collective resilience, joy and liberation. This is where so many [queer people of color] are drawn into talking about sex/desire/sexuality. The body is both a location of oppression as well as a place of liberation and desire.

*Desiring Change* is working towards precisely this liberation, in the ways that we inhabit our bodies, demand public space, and build deep and long-term activism and knowledge in the service of social justice for everyone.

## A Framework for Desire and Change

*“No political movement succeeds without desire: desire for justice, for democracy, for freedom, for the wild ideals of starting over again with a new set of values and possibilities.”*

—Amber Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires*

*“As the broader discourse on sexuality and power continues to engage with questions of state power, marginality, and normativity, [sex worker movements] will remain critical for pushing the edges of what we conceive, imagine, and practice.”*

—Svati P. Shah, “A New Queer Agenda”

*We come to this work precisely because our desire, the sex we crave, the body we want to adorn, is under attack. And we arrive at the gates of a movement that tells us in order to “win,” we must cover, we must hide. It is time for us to embrace the fire we’ve been running toward as the fuel for radical transformation.*

—Kenyon Farrow, for Desiring Change

Desire and gender are brought alive through the ways lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and intersexed people use their bodies; desire and gender are made poignant and meaningful by the ways we construct or deny our erotic passions and gendered identities in the course of daily life. People will take risks—facing marginalization, isolation, and even violence—to identify and act upon their desires. And they will live out their unique understanding of gender—no matter how

dangerous or costly the results. The Desiring Change project and “A New Queer Agenda” are distinctive in their challenge to the LGBTQ and progressive movements to bring sex and gender issues to the center of their political agendas, and to create a coalition of groups and organizations that will value, defend, and articulate a progressive agenda for radical sex and gender issues in the context of race and class in this country.

By refusing to consider sex and gender outside the context of class and race, the Desiring Change project and the work it gathers together articulates the value of human sexual yearning, the power of gender divergence, and the importance of desire for ecstasy into the core of our political understanding, so that a fiercely sex-positive analysis will grace our movement. The Desiring Change project believes that consciousness and the world itself can be transformed by experiences of pleasure and ecstasy, as much as they can be by oppression and pain. Desiring Change generates promise from its willingness to advocate fearlessly for the creation of a culture capable of genuine sexual and gender expression, social justice and freedom.

Because this vision is so expansive, it requires cross-issue organizing. Desiring Change explores the picture that emerges when a range of issues are brought together. Movements about alternative family forms, immigration, incarceration, homelessness, poverty, urban development, “welfare reform,” and the “war on drugs” are opportunities for new analysis and action. What are the specific connections between queer lives, queer desires, and social issues as diverse as adoption and



incarceration? And when we do organize across the lines that delineate these specific issues what is the holistic vision toward which we hope to move? How might we get there? What is the relation between providing services to specific people and advocacy on behalf of change? What are the roles of ideas and research in movements facing the immediacy of hunger and homelessness, attacks from the religious and political Right, aggressive policing, and the ongoing fear and stigma towards people living with HIV and AIDS? How can we connect the longer-term projects of research and vision to the immediate pressures of peoples' needs and desires? How is the body a formative site for both desire and for targeting by the state? And finally, where do we go from here?

Desiring Change does not provide a plan in the sense of a blueprint, but it does provide a sign-post; it suggests that we follow the impetus provided by desire—the motivation of seeking to build a world that we actually want—while depending on the solidarity of a wide range of related movements. The intense and unpredictable relations of queer life that connect us to all different kinds of people in all different kinds of ways (an intensity and unpredictability that sometimes makes queerness scary to us and to others) can also provide the basis for a holistic vision of justice, one that doesn't require us to remove either different people or different issues from our line of vision. This world—exciting, unexpected, and encompassing—is possible, but it will take both desire and change to make it so.

# VISIONS & POSSIBILITIES

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## Continuing Conversations

To develop new frameworks and models for organizing, as well as new constituencies for activism, conversations like those that sparked *Desiring Change* need to be sustained. Moving forward, these conversations could take place in multiple formats, hosted by a range of sponsors and at a range of sites: in town hall meetings and community discussions and in settings ranging from colleges to community centers to homeless shelters.

## Create Frames for Interconnected Work

BCRW and QEJ, along with many of the contributors to “A New Queer Agenda” have long worked to provide frameworks for understanding how different issues are inter-related. More work can be done, however, to provide both in-depth analysis and short working papers that articulate frameworks for allied action on capitalism, gender, and queerness at the intersections of specific issues such as health, housing, HIV, poverty, low wage workers, incarceration, aging, immigration, and homelessness.

## Develop Experimental Models

Many of the groups participating in *Desiring Change* have developed innovative and exciting models for organizing, but there are few mechanisms by which to share these models among groups and movements. Moreover, many of the groups reported that they were actively in need of new models that would help them to produce broader work without overwhelming their

infrastructures. The opportunity to work together, as single organizations, in small groups, or at larger gatherings to produce new models, experiment with possibilities, and share results would remove some of the frustrating roadblocks to moving forward together.

## Pursue Pilot Programs

These conversations, frames of analysis, and experiments in organizing can all contribute to pilot programs that might provide the building blocks for new forms of social movement. Instead of replacing single-issue politics with a singular and coherent framework, *Desiring Change* envisions a network of possibilities—social movements made up of relationships and projects that are simultaneously specific and overlapping, focused and open to connection. Such a network can allow for both political determination and queer desire.

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