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'Reinvigorating the Queer Political Imagination':
A Roundtable with Ryan Conrad, Yasmin Nair,
and Karma Chávez of Against Equality

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“Reinvigorating the Queer Political Imagination”: A Roundtable with Ryan Conrad, Yasmin Nair, and Karma Chávez of Against Equality

Margot Weiss

Margot Weiss talked with Ryan Conrad, Yasmin Nair, and Karma Chávez, three members of Against Equality, a queer online archive, publishing, and arts collective that challenges the political vision of mainstream gay and lesbian politics—especially inclusion in marriage, the U.S. military, and the prison industrial complex via hate crimes legislation. They have three anthologies: Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage, Against Equality: Don't Ask to Fight Their Wars, and Against Equality: Prisons Will Not Protect You.

Margot: I'd love for you to begin by talking about the reception of Against Equality's work. So much of what you do straddles the seeming “divide” between academic or intellectual labor, and activist or political work.

Ryan: I've toured extensively with the Against Equality anthologies and have been lucky to engage all sorts of folks in conversation about our project. While on tour I found that many folks from all sorts of backgrounds (urban/rural, formally educated/self taught, etc.) were hungry for our critique and eager to relate it to their local activist work. The separation between intellectual labor and political organizing seems dubious at best—most folks I met on tour were critically engaged with both.

The reception to our work is unique because of how we have positioned ourselves. Our three anthologies are entirely self-published and are distributed through our self-managed website along with the help of the activist publisher/distributor AK Press. In this publishing process we seized the means of production of knowledge, which is an explicitly activist gesture for an intellectual project. This has allowed us to exist inside and outside academia in interesting ways. For example, our books are taught in university classrooms in the United States and Canada, but they are also used as tools by activists to challenge the

neoliberal politics of mainstream gay and lesbian organizations. We've received numerous e-mails from activists thanking us for the work we do while sharing stories about giving copies of our books to friends and family they are hoping to challenge. Often these stories are about trying to convince their friends and family that their energy would be better focused elsewhere than on the resource-sapping gay marriage campaign trail.

Yasmin: We've found that the greatest resistance to our work comes not from the right wing but from the purported left. Often, we are told that our work is too "intellectual" or that it is simply analysis that cannot serve peoples' immediate political needs. For instance, those of us who work with prisoners often face the criticism that newsletters and analysis are too much for them. In fact, historically, what has threatened the prison industrial complex the most is intellectual work done by prisoners—and the documents and manifestoes that emerged from Attica are proof of this. Revolutions occur through and with intellectual struggles and debates.

Some of this anti-intellectualism comes from a privileged set of leftist critics (both academics and public intellectuals) who have, I think, a view of the "proletariat" or "the working class" that is both romantic and condescending. There's a great deal of fetishization of "class" and "working people" lately, with the Occupy movement—which is not an anticapitalist movement but one composed mainly of people angry that capitalism has not worked for them. I've always been struck by the American/U.S. refusal to think about economic inequality—which is what marriage, war, and prisons are all about, really.

Karma: One important thing also to consider, and Yasmin offers this critique frequently, is that the "left" we are talking about as somewhat anti-intellectual or anti-academic isn't much of a left at all anymore. If supporting gay marriage is a leftist position, for example, then the left doesn't exist. The so-called left, in this regard, colludes with the right—the folks in Arizona banning ethnic studies or in Texas trying to bar the teaching of critical thinking. It is crucial to see how these are manifestations of similar logics.

Margot: You've mentioned that AE is sometimes seen as too intellectual for activist circles and too activisty for academic circles. How do you challenge the dichotomy between "purely" intellectual labor and political action in your collective intellectual and archival work?

Ryan: The concept of intellectual labor is hard for many activist folks to swallow because they don't see thinking/reading/analyzing as a legitimate form of labor. Because of this, it's difficult to even address the distinction between intellectual labor and political action. Intellectual labor isn't seen as real labor and it is therefore dismissed, while action in the streets is fetishized as a more authentic manifestation of political action and organizing.

Yasmin: Right. At the same time, there's also an inability or refusal to recognize that “action” is a form of analysis—that action is always ideological. The best example I have for this is my work challenging the DREAM Activists here in Chicago. They are a well-oiled group of students—highly articulate, highly educated, all from major universities in the area—who are also supported by fairly influential and even powerful academic and activist circles. But they constantly deploy “storytelling” and “occupying” as part of their strategies—either by constantly “coming out” as queer and undocumented (thus gaining sympathy from disparate groups) or by staging themselves as autonomous and feisty young activists who no longer care about the consequences of being out and all the rest. But as I keep pointing out, these strategies are rooted in an analysis that recognizes the affective appeal of “coming out” to immigrant and gay communities, and that also understands the visual and discursive appeal of images of young, attractive, learned, and, yes, articulate English-speaking students (to date, there have been no Spanish-speaking youth at these events) seeming to dare to take on the system. “Action” is always saturated in analysis, so it's outrageous to me when our critiques are dismissed as “too analytic.”

Karma: I also want to say that we are not always engaged with as intellectual equals by academics inside academia. One of the difficulties for us in relating to academics (and I am one) is that, from my perspective, our intellectual labor is sometimes seen as a resource to pilfer from without necessarily acknowledging where it comes from.

Yasmin: We recognize the irony of the fact that the three of us who write and speak for Against Equality hold PhDs or are working toward them (our other two members also have degrees, but prefer to work behind the scenes). We also recognize that intellectual work and thought and analysis can rarely be pinned down to a single originary point. But still, there are specific factors that serve to undermine work regarded as “activist” as opposed to work produced in more formal academic networks. One of them is simply the politics of academic publishing and citational practice (making it difficult to cite “nonacademic”

sources because they are “too ephemeral” and so on). But also, in a time of more anxiety around academic publishing and a fraught job market, there are more academics willing to poach the work of activists in order to strengthen their own analyses. Given the inequities that exist and very real material advantages—tenure, promotion, money, speaking fees—there are huge consequences to this kind of poaching. And, at the end of the day, it betrays the most basic principles of intellectual generosity and undermines the kind of intellectual work we do—academic or not.

Margot: Thinking about the power dynamics of knowledge production within and outside the academy, what kinds of materials do you feel are most crucial to archive and who do you hope will have access to them?

Ryan: The question of access to ideas was at the forefront when I began archiving work about gay marriage in the fall of 2009. At the time I was living in a mill town in central Maine with a very small, but deliciously eclectic, queer and trans community that was in the midst of a gay marriage referendum. Something the archive has done for me is break down feelings of political isolation that I felt during the gay marriage campaign in Maine at that time. In fact, Yasmin and I worked on the first anthology about critiques of gay marriage for over a year without ever meeting each other face-to-face. So there are some very tangible benefits to the archive, like putting like-minded people into dialogue, and in some cases contact, with one another. Additionally, the books *Against Equality* publishes provide access to conversations that are happening so readily online to folks offline. Lots of rural folks don't have access to high-speed Internet because it's not profitable for telecommunications companies to install fiber optic cables. Lots of older folks aren't interested in engaging with the Internet in the same way many younger folks do. And the queer and trans prison population has very little access to ideas that are being discussed online. Since our project began, we've sent free books to any prisoner who requests them. So these anthologies, composed largely of online material in our digital archive, are a way for us to offer greater offline access to these important conversations.

Karma: The archival work *Against Equality* does—archiving radical queer intellectual labor—is very important because it shows that there has long been a very vibrant radical queer intellectual strand to LGBTQ politics.

Yasmin: We keep finding exciting and often very beautiful broadsides and short zines and pamphlets, for instance, critical of gay mainstream politics, from the 1980s and earlier, and we’ve been scanning them into our archive. Most recently we’ve added the broadsheet “Queers Read This” published by Anonymous Queers from 1990 and Pink Tank’s “We Will Not Protect You” from 2005 (both in the “Marriage” archive). That’s a part of our work that’s especially heartening and fun and exciting.

Margot: What do you hope will happen with the material you write and collect?

Ryan: From the beginning, the mission of Against Equality has been to reinvigorate the queer political imagination. By building this archive we are creating an opportunity to do just that: to imagine other possible, more equitable worlds outside the framework of neoliberalism, and to work our way toward them.

Karma: We are trying to literally alter the political conversation. We want to distribute and contribute to a long history of radical queer thought, not for its own sake but to change people’s lives. In my opinion, we are not utopian. We think such change is possible.

Yasmin: Against Equality reminds people that radically different—and far better—worlds are possible only through radical thought and action. Our archive and our ongoing work provide a springboard for collective thinking and action about what those worlds might look like. Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore once said in an interview, “Our dreams [of marriage, hate crimes legislation, the military] have gotten so small.” I think what Against Equality shows is that we queers have always had bigger and better dreams, and that attaining the impossible—free health care, a world without prisons, no more war—is within our reach.