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2018

# Queer Politics in Neoliberal Times (1970s-2010s)

Margot Weiss



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/mdweiss/27/>

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QUEER POLITICS IN  
NEOLIBERAL TIMES  
(1970–2010s)

Margot Weiss

Neoliberalism—as both economic theory and social or cultural formation—has had a profound effect on LGBT/queer cultures and politics. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as an economic theory that “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”<sup>1</sup> Neoliberalism is also a cultural formation that produces and validates marketized understandings of the social world. As Wendy Brown argues, drawing on Michel Foucault’s work on biopolitics and governmentality, neoliberalism is aimed at “extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action.”<sup>2</sup> Neoliberalism offers “freedom” as the core political goal, and the market as the site where that freedom might be realized.

This vision has reshaped LGBT communities, debates, and social movements in the era after gay liberation. As neoliberal policies sought to privatize social services, foster consumer citizenship, and promote corporate welfare and urban redevelopment, LGBT sexual politics increasingly pitted “deserving” gay and lesbian people against “undeserving” others. Three constellations exemplify this trend: (1) the same-sex married couple vs. the “welfare queen,” (2) the gay/lesbian consumer-citizen vs. the poor queer, and (3) the gay gentrifier vs. the “dangerous” other. Historicizing these oppositions reveals the intersections of sexuality, class, gender, race, and social policy that remain central to queer politics today in the aftermath of—if not after—neoliberalism.

**Neoliberalism: Economics, Politics, Culture**

Scholars have traced a pre-history of neoliberalism to the 1940s or even the 1920s, finding important intellectual precursors to neoliberalism proper in the attacks on Roosevelt’s New Deal, the Public Works Administration, and the 1935 Social Security Act in the US; universal pensions, unemployment insurance, and the National Health Service in the UK; and on stock market and financial regulations in the name of property rights, economic rationality, and competition. Members of the Mount Pelerin Society, a neoliberal think tank founded by Friedrich August von Hayek in 1947, and the “Chicago Boys,” especially Milton Friedman,

formulated the core of the theory. These economists advanced a theory of the self-interested *homo economicus* (economic man) operating in a market “freed” from state control and regulation.

Neoliberal economic policy rose to dominance following the 1970s global economic crisis, characterized by rising unemployment, declining rates of profits, and inflation. Augusto Pinochet’s 1973 coup in Chile, the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher in the UK, and the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan in the US were also turns away from Keynesian state protections and market regulations. By the 1980s, with Latin American “structural adjustment,” Thatcherism, and Reganomics in full swing, neoliberalism solidified its hold, resulting in policy reforms and austerity programs. In the US and UK, this led to the privatization and deregulation of public spaces and institutions (education, healthcare, social services); in the global South, neoliberalism took the form of programs that sought to “open up” markets for the free flow of capital. Recent anthropological studies of the global impact of neoliberalism have shown that “inequalities have risen sharply; most people are marginalized, dispossessed, and disenfranchised as public resources have been privatized, cities increasingly gentrified, social welfare programs reduced or slashed, and the rural and urban poor incorporated into market economies.”<sup>3</sup>

Neoliberalism is a rapacious form of “accumulation by dispossession” characterized by the “corporatization, commodification, and privatization of hitherto public assets,” predatory speculation and financialization, “crisis creation, management, and manipulation,” and “state redistribution” of wealth upward, by privatizing social services and encouraging gentrification through tax codes and corporate welfare.<sup>4</sup> The growth of speculative, consumer-based, de-industrial markets in the global North is directly connected to global crises, precarity, and poverty in the global South, just as the rise of profiteering multinational corporations and service sector and low-paying just-in-time work has fostered a rising gap between rich and poor, owners and workers, in the United States.

Neoliberalism is an economic argument that the market should be freed from state regulation, resulting in social policies such as privatization and cuts in welfare, education, and healthcare. It is a political discourse that helps justify the resulting debt, fiscal crises, and the upward redistribution of wealth. And finally, neoliberalism is a hegemonic discourse—the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.<sup>5</sup> As such, it makes the ethical claim that individuals should be responsible, rational, “competitive,” and “possessive” actors who make claims based on “consumer sovereignty.”<sup>6</sup> For these reasons, neoliberalism as an organizing logic has had a profound impact on how everyone, including LGBT and queer people, understand and live out their political lives.

### Neoliberalism and Queer Culture and Politics

Neoliberalism creates and relies on racial, gendered, and sexual inequality, but justifies this social inequality as a logical outcome of free choice, personal responsibility, and individualism. By redefining citizenship as ownership and freedom as freedom to consume, neoliberal economic policies have dismantled social welfare, enshrined a property-based right to privacy, and destroyed public sexual cultures accessible to poor, young, queer, and transgender communities of color. Building on the groundbreaking work of historians such as John D’Emilio, who linked gay identity to the rise of industrial capitalism, I focus on the ways that neoliberalism, in its relation to the culture of what Fredric Jameson has termed late capitalism, celebrates, endorses, and supports some aspects of sexuality, while at the same time limiting, policing, and punishing others.

As a rationality, neoliberalism has narrowed the vision of much LGBT political organizing to what Lisa Duggan calls “homonormativity”: “a politics that does not contest dominant

heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”<sup>7</sup> Mainstream gay advocacy organizations have pursued individual and family-based rights and turned away from liberationist or radical demands for dismantling oppressive systems or promoting sexual freedom or pleasure. We can see this vision reflected in the primary goals of the national movement through the 2010s: same-sex marriage and family recognition rights, market/cultural visibility, access to the military, and hate crime/safety legislation. The following three cases show how homonormativity has guided the mainstream LGBT rights movement for the past three decades.

### Privatization of Social Services: Gay Marriage/The Welfare Queen

A February 15, 1976 *New York Times* article entitled “‘Welfare Queen’ Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign,” began: “Few people realize it, but Linda Taylor, a 47-year-old Chicago welfare recipient, has become a major campaign issue in the New Hampshire Republican Presidential primary.” The term “Welfare Queen” was popularized by Ronald Reagan in his 1976 stump speeches, where he used it to describe a poor black woman on welfare who was purportedly “cheating the system.” The figure helped to rally support and justification for the massive cuts to welfare and social services that Reagan pursued. The “welfare queen” trafficked in older iconographies of poor black women’s deviant sexuality that were reinvigorated after the 1965 Moynihan Report on the gendered and sexual “pathologies” of the black family. The Report depicted black single mothers as sites of “unrestrained sexual behavior”—and thus responsible for their own poverty. Relying on and reviving these imaginative links between race, poverty, and (sexual) pathology, the image of the “Welfare Queen” played a central role in portraying the poor as greedy, not needy. Harnessing sexual deviance to racialized poverty, the image helped shore up public support for the privatization and elimination of social services (in spite of the fact that most who needed welfare and child assistance were and are white).

This image continued to do its work in the post-Reagan era. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, for example, dramatically cut funding to basic safety net programs and ended “welfare as we know it,” as Bill Clinton pledged. After public debate about welfare “abusers,” the act replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and required welfare recipients to take low-paying jobs to qualify for benefits (workfare). It also aimed to limit the number of children women on welfare could have, adding “family caps” to benefits and giving extra money to US states that reduced the number of “out-of-wedlock” births without increasing abortions. The Act also supported state abstinence-only education programs (that have roots in much longer eugenic histories of the sterilization and reproductive control of poor women of color). As Priya Kandaswamy argues, “Although the law had negative impacts on a wide array of women, support for the law was framed specifically as a means of disciplining sexually promiscuous, lazy black (and more recently Latina) ‘welfare queens’ who supposedly used government assistance to live outside the confines of both the labor market and the heteropatriarchal family.”<sup>8</sup> This history shows the connection between disciplining the racialized poor as sexually deviant and marshaling public consent for the neoliberal decimation of public assistance.

The pathologization of non-(hetero)normative racialized sexualities justifies a central component of neoliberal policy: limiting and privatizing welfare benefits. By propagating an image of the underserving (and hypersexual) welfare mother, and linking social support to normative sexuality, these acts endorsed anti-queer (and anti-feminist) policies such as abstinence

until marriage, heteronormative marriage and family forms, and control over the reproductive futures of “undesirable” populations (poor people, indigenous people, people of color, queer people). As Cathy Cohen argues, “many of the roots of heteronormativity are in white supremacist ideologies which sought (and continue) to use the state and its regulation of sexuality, in particular through the institution of heterosexual marriage, to designate which individuals were truly ‘fit’ for full rights and privileges of citizenship.”<sup>9</sup> Such arguments are ongoing: between 2005 and 2015, federal programs privatizing carework (within the family) and cutting state support for poor mothers and children provided \$150 million a year to promote “healthy marriages” and “responsible fathers.”

For many queer critics, because marriage promotion is one way that non-normative gender and sexuality—particularly the sexualities of black and poor women—is disciplined by the neoliberal state, the mainstream LGBT movement’s emphasis on same-sex marriage was disappointing. Critics such as Michael Warner have long argued against state regulation in the form of marriage. In this most recent instantiation, the neoliberal withdrawal of public social support serves as an incentive to seek marriage as the source of care, support, and resource protection. As Cohen writes, “Same-sex marriage, far from ending ‘marriage as we know it,’ preserves a narrow system for the distribution of benefits that is tied to heteronormative understandings of the family. It allows the state to continue to shift its responsibility for the well being of its citizens to some private form we label the family.”<sup>10</sup> In this context, the LGBT movement’s emphasis on same-sex marriage must be viewed as the success of neoliberal policies that offer marriage as a privatized solution to peoples’ needs for childcare, healthcare, economic stability, and social recognition.

In the 2015 US Supreme Court case granting same-sex couples the right to marry, the Court argued that the right to marry is foundational to individual autonomy, liberty, and personal choice; that marriage “fulfills yearnings for security, safe haven, and connection that express our common humanity”; and that marital status is the legitimate basis for both social recognition and material and state benefits, including inheritance and property rights, spousal privileges, medical decision-making, adoption rights, workers’ compensation benefits, health insurance, and child custody and support benefits.<sup>11</sup> Justice Anthony Kennedy concludes the opinion: “No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. . . . [The petitioners’] hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization’s oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law.”<sup>12</sup> Like other LGBT family-making strategies such as transracial and transnational adoption, new LGBT family rights are historically dependent on neoliberal transformations: the dismantling of social services, a shrinking social safety net, US migration and labor flows, and the racialized criminalization of poverty.<sup>13</sup> The call for the “dignity” of gay and lesbian marriage, like other pleas based on sexual respectability, depends on the regulation and policing of others—often the reproductive futurity of poor, queer, people of color. Such neoliberal family politics affirm the health and humanity of some, while helping to justify surveillance, exclusion, and poverty for others.<sup>14</sup>

### The Pink Market: Queer Consumer Citizens/Queer Poverty

In May 1982, the *New York Times Magazine* ran an essay called “Tapping the Homosexual Market,” in which Karen Stabiner reported that advertisers were now “wooing . . . the white, single, well-educated, well-paid man who happens to be homosexual.” As Katherine Sender details, this new “pink market” was prompted by market research that seemed to point to the wealth of gay men and lesbians; in the early 1990s, Overlooked Opinions, a gay-marketing

firm, claimed the American gay and lesbian market was worth \$514 billion. Throughout the 1990s, gays and lesbians were described as ideal consumers: affluent, well-educated, fashionable, and “DINK” (double-income, no kids). As a 1995 article had it, “The gay and lesbian market is an untapped gold mine. Because gays are highly educated and usually have no dependants, they have high levels of disposable income. And because these consumers are disenfranchised from mainstream society, they are open to overtures from marketers.”<sup>15</sup>

Recoding citizens as consumers, neoliberalism proffers privatized consumption as its model of citizenship and community. In a neoliberal world, “freedom is reduced to choice: choice of commodities, of lifeways, and, most of all, of identities” while politics is treated as a “personal trait or lifestyle choice. . . measured increasingly by the capacity to transact and consume.”<sup>16</sup> The rise of the so-called “pink market” made gay men and lesbians visible as consumers and offered limited recognition to those who might “voice their politics through their spending.”<sup>17</sup> In this form of consumer citizenship, LGBT politics aligns with market politics: good citizens, as David Evans notes, are those who express their identities and politics through the purchase of lifestyle commodities. The ever-expanding marketplace of such goods and services has transformed sexual identities and communities throughout the US. For these reasons, LGBT communities cannot be understood as oppositional to capitalism. Instead, capitalism “depend[s] on and generate[s] community,” and communities—even alternative ones—can be “deployed to . . . facilitate the flow of capital.”<sup>18</sup>

The growth of niche markets and consumer lifestyles is a boon for late capitalism. But it is less clear that the rise of the pink market has had positive effects for the majority of LGBT/queer people. Indeed, although marketers and the media paint gay men and sometimes lesbians as an affluent elite, research from at least the mid-1990s shows that this is a pernicious myth. As Amber Hollibaugh and Margot Weiss point out, research from 2013 revealed that bisexuals, lesbians, and gay men experience higher rates of poverty than heterosexuals. One in four bisexuals receive food stamps, more than one in five LGBT people who live alone report an income at or below the poverty level. In 2013, 2.4 million LGBT adults did not have enough money to feed themselves or their family. Poverty is compounded by sexism, racism, transphobia, disability, and other forms of structural oppression: people of color, trans people, and women—especially those who have a disability, live in rural regions, and are older—are much more likely to be poor. A 2011 study showed that trans people are four times more likely than the general population to live in poverty, and poverty rates among transgender people of color are particularly high—34 percent of black and 28 percent of Latina/o transgender people have household incomes of less than \$10,000 per year. A lifetime of discrimination and criminalization renders LGBT people more vulnerable to the precarious conditions that face so many today struggling in the aftermath of neoliberal restructuring: living paycheck to paycheck, with limited opportunities to care adequately for oneself and one’s kin, threatened by criminalized poverty and economic precarity.

The myth of gay affluence, which promotes the image of the acceptable gay consumer-citizen, blots from view the many LGBT people “who are manual workers, sex workers, unemployed, and imprisoned,” queer and trans youth thrown out of their homes, homeless adults, and trans and queer poverty.<sup>19</sup> When LGBT people are only visible in the marketplace, non-white, non-middle-class, non-gender normative queer and trans people are shut out or rendered invisible; when LGBT politics is formulated around the desires of the consuming citizen, the neoliberal policies that keep so many LGBT/queer people precarious remain in place. The mainstream LGBT movement assists with this when it welcomes multinational corporations to sponsor pride parades or celebrates gay consumer or popular cultural achievements while ignoring the needs of the LGBT/queer poor and working-class people who make

the rainbow paraphernalia and work in low-wage service or retail jobs and street economies in gay neighborhoods.<sup>20</sup> When LGBT activism has promoted the gay consumer-citizen at the cost of more radical and marginalized voices, it has sought political goals that benefit the wealthiest LGBT people at the cost of most.

### 3. Safe Spaces: Gay Gentrifiers/Dangerous Queers

In December 2010, the *New York Times* reported that "After 30 Years, Times Square Rebirth Is Complete." The project was a success. "Crime is down significantly from the days when pimps, prostitutes, drug addicts and dope pushers prowled Times Square and the Deuce, that stretch of 42nd Street was known. The number of tourists is up 74 percent since 1993, to an estimated 36.5 million last year . . . Morgan Stanley, Allianz Global Investors, Viacom and Condé Nast now make their corporate homes there. . . . And while many billboards in Times Square were blank in 1979, today the area is a kaleidoscope of moving images depicting financial institutions, automakers and fashion houses, with the best spots on 1 Times Square's facade commanding as much as \$4 million a year in rent." Tim Tompkins, president of the Times Square Alliance, told the *Times* that while "this place represents . . . the epitome of free-market capitalism . . . its transformation is due more to government intervention than just about any other development in the country." The upward state redistribution of resources in the form of tax incentives and corporate welfare that defines "free-market" neoliberalism has had profound effects on US LGBT life.

Begun in 1980, the Times Square 42nd Street Development Project follows similar paths to other US urban redevelopment projects.<sup>21</sup> The state condemned land parcels, evicting and razing businesses, and offered developers large property tax abatements and benefits such as zoning law changes to build new luxury skyscrapers and shopping malls. These transformations recreated the city as a landscape of consumption, orientated toward tourists and shoppers. Although gentrification in urban centers is not new, in the 1970s and 1980s neoliberal policies connected redevelopment to the privatization of other formerly public goods and services (education, healthcare, the arts, and even public parks). Newly privatized spaces of consumption drove out residents who could no longer afford to live where they worked. Rather than "gentrification," Martin Manalansan encourages us to use the phrase "neoliberal urban governance" to describe these processes, emphasizing that such transformations are not organic, but are orchestrated and enforced by the corporations and property owners who profit from them.<sup>22</sup>

The redevelopment of Times Square has resulted in the destruction of public sex cultures. Samuel Delany writes about the old Times Square—the sex workers, peep shows, and cruising places that redevelopment replaced with family- and tourist-friendly shopping experiences. Starting with the 1985 criminalization of bathhouses in New York City, Delany writes, "a notion of safety" ushered in safe sex, safe neighborhoods, safe cities, and safe (that is, committed and monogamous) relationships. "In the name of 'safety'" (or family values), developers, with city support, destroyed the publicly accessible institutions that supported unplanned and complex social and sexual encounters between different kinds of people—especially the cross-class and interracial intimacies that make for a thriving public sexual culture.<sup>23</sup> Delany's work makes clear that the "Disneyfication" of Times Square was not about safety, but about profit-making. In 1993, New York City began implementing more extensive "quality-of-life" interventions. Police targeted minor offenses such as jumping subway turnstiles, panhandling, and loitering. The next year, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani introduced new zoning policies to restrict

strip clubs and erotic video stores and theaters to isolated nonresidential neighborhoods, prohibiting their proximity to schools, houses of worship, and other similar commercial establishments. By the end of the decade, Michael Warner warned, "a pall hangs over the public life of queers. . . . As in other US cities, sex publics in New York that have been built up over several decades—by the gay movement, by AIDS activism, and by countercultures of many different kinds—are now endangered by a new politics of privatization."<sup>24</sup>

The commodification of urban space meant that sexual cultures—including gay spaces—have been increasingly reduced to privatized spaces of consumption. Gay neighborhoods such as New York City's Village or San Francisco's Castro became tourist attractions and shopping/entertainment enclaves, capitalizing on the image of gay and lesbians as affluent, stylish consumers and taste-makers. Rather than representing vice or perversity as they had for most of the twentieth century, gays at the turn of the new millennium, David Bell and Jon Binnie argue, were increasingly "cast as model citizens of the urban renaissance, contributing towards the gentrification of commodifiable cosmopolitan residential and commercial areas."<sup>25</sup> At the same time, spaces for queers of color, queer youth, or poor queers—such as New York City's Chelsea piers—were razed and replaced with locked and gated parks and new condominium complexes. Redevelopment "is about fencing off unwanted colored [and queer] bodies," Manalansan writes, yet, rather than a target for intervention, it is celebrated by much of the LGBT press as "positive outcomes and developments for all queers."<sup>26</sup>

Like the rise of the same-sex marriage movement and the gay consumer-citizen, the reorientation of cities toward the wealthy obscures the queer poor people, street youth, people of color, people with disabilities, and trans people shut out from acceptable neoliberal citizenship. In cities across the US, LGBT activism since the 1980s has pitted the interests of white gay (and lesbian) middle-class residents/property-owners against young, queer and trans people of color, using "safety" as the language of power. In her history of gay and lesbian anti-violence activism, Christina Hanhardt shows how gay visibility and community has been used to justify the policing, targeting, and profiling of those assumed to be dangerous. In these imaginaries, wealthy gay consumers are good investors, cruising spaces and sexual zones should be privatized, and poor queer people, people of color, youth, trans people, and people with disabilities are rendered "risky," detrimental to "quality of life" and a potential threat to capital.

We therefore cannot look only at gains in "cultural visibility" for LGBT people to measure political and social progress. Historically, increased media visibility has been "directly connected to the criminalization of black people, trans people, people of color, and people doing sex work," Reina Gossett argues, because visibility projects tend to reinforce existing modes of sexual respectability.<sup>27</sup> This same dynamic exists today: the rise of media representations of trans women of color in 2014 and 2015, Gossett argues, corresponds to the highest recorded murder rates of those same women. LGBT campaigns for visibility—in the form of media visibility, marketing recognition, new gay-orientated business developments, or social recognition—have depended on the invisibility, criminalization, and abjection of queered others. As such, they have benefited from and reinforced neoliberal capitalist restructuring: the massive cuts in social programs (and their incomplete replacement by non-profit organizations shored up by corporate and major donor philanthropy), the privatization of public institutions and spaces, and the coercive policing of immigrant, racialized, and criminalized bodies that have occurred *alongside* the development of gay and lesbian commercial marketplaces and neighborhoods.

As with marriage rights and consumer citizenship, gay gentrification marks the triumph of the neoliberal distortion of gay liberation and social justice movements from the 1960s. As Duggan argues, in the era of New Homonormativity, "'equality' becomes narrow, formal access



to a few conservatizing institutions, 'freedom' becomes impunity for bigotry and vast inequalities in commercial life and civil society, the 'right to privacy' becomes domestic confinement, and democratic politics itself becomes something to be escaped . . . Welcome to the New World Order!"<sup>28</sup> Welcome to neoliberalism.

### The Ends of Neoliberalism?

After the Great Recession of 2008, some scholars suggested that neoliberalism was over—that the deregulation, speculation, and free market policies that brought about this most recent crisis had been delegitimized. Most now agree that reports of its death were premature. Since neoliberalism has, for decades, transformed the way that the state creates and sustains new subjects and social relations best suited to new markets, the historical transformations that I detail in this essay—especially perhaps movement goals and visions—are not easily displaced.

Other scholars have argued that the language of freedom and choice so central to neoliberal ideology might be in retreat, or at least overwhelmed by a new emphasis on safety, security, and policing, especially after the events of 9/11. Susan Hyatt, for example, argues that "the idealized subject of neoliberal policy was the citizen-consumer who was 'responsibilized' to make wise and prudent choices in the 'free market' of utilities and services, ranging from healthcare to schooling. In contrast, the idealized subject of the law-and-order state is now the citizen who both policies and agrees to be policed."<sup>29</sup> Still others argue that the carceral state—the explosive growth of the prison-industrial complex and new state security and surveillance apparatuses—is a continuation of, rather than a departure from, neoliberal policies.

In LGBT politics, the post 9/11 era marks a transition from homonormativity to what Jasbir Puar has called "homonationalism": the alignment of respectable LGBT citizen-subjects with the state and against other queered subjects, such as the terrorist, the criminal, the poor, and the undocumented, who face the harshest legal and extralegal techniques of the state and its related corporate interests.<sup>30</sup> As Karma Chávez argues, homonational logics that accept US state militarism as a prerequisite for national belonging are at work not only in campaigns such as the fight to repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," but also in mainstream LGBT immigration politics. By prioritizing family reunification, such campaigns emphasized respectable, "deserving" same-sex bi-national families with higher income levels, allowing others to languish in militarized detention facilities; by supporting the DREAM Act, organizations accepted that conditional permanent residency would only extend to those youth who, among other criteria, possess "a clean criminal record and thus good moral standing" and attend either two years of college or serve at least two years in the military.<sup>31</sup> Another way homonationalism is pressed into the service of the state is through "pinkwashing," the use of gay-friendly images (such as tourist attractions or state support of same-sex marriage) to portray the state as tolerant and modern. In Israel and the US, even while hyper-securitized borders and an increasing surveillance-orientated state targets queered people for social death, pinkwashing perpetuates a civilizing narrative that justifies ongoing settler colonialism, occupation, and militarization in the name of anti-homophobia. These developments make use of and build upon neoliberal modes of extraction, securitization, and citizenship.

A final critique of neoliberalism concerns its utility as a concept. Some scholars, such as Catherine Kingfisher and Jeff Maskovsky, and Jolin Clarke, have argued that "neoliberalism" has become a cant word, overused in scholarship that treats it as an abstract concept or actor in the world, rather than as a partial and unstable process. Others argue that "particularities and local categories and meanings" can be "erased when everything is subsumed under the framework of neoliberalism."<sup>32</sup> Still, there is a need for studies that take up neoliberalism not

as a monolith, but as an assemblage, as "mobile calculative techniques of governing" in order to better understand divergent LGBT/queer projects and histories.<sup>33</sup>

These debates on the term itself reflect ongoing desires to better understand, historicize and critique the devastating effect global capitalism has had over the past forty years. In these projects, "neoliberalism" operates less as a fixed relation between the market, the state, and the subject, and more as a critique. Yet as we survey the impact neoliberal logics have had on the LGBT movement and queer culture since the 1970s, I think one of the greatest risks comes in neoliberalism's characteristic ability to reabsorb critique, recasting politics as freedom for the entrepreneurial self in the market. The absorption of social differences into new markets that I explored throughout this essay also plays out in the academy, where "politicized intellectual labor is simultaneously promoted and contained," perhaps especially in fields like queer studies.<sup>34</sup> In this context, we need to be especially mindful that our ideas risk being taken up, coopted and commodified. For neoliberalism describes not only the conditions that give rise to the sexual and economic politics that we seek to challenge but also to the social and political conditions of the contemporary US academy. This has included a restructuring of the academy in terms of the so-called "marketplace of ideas," the casualization of labor, and the privatization of education itself.

Even so, I find neoliberalism an essential concept for a project of historicizing queer sexual politics after the 1970s. The LGBT movement's focus on neoliberal goals—individual and family rights, formal legal equality, state protections, and market visibility—has, as Dean Spade argues, "come with enormous costs": missed opportunities for coalition and the alienation of many LGBT/queer people. Even more, the movement's turn toward "privatization, criminalization, and militarization have caused it to be incorporated into the neoliberal agenda in ways that not only ignore, but also directly disserve and further endanger and marginalize, those most vulnerable to regimes of homophobia and state violence."<sup>35</sup> A critique of neoliberalism in relation to LGBT communities and politics might help us avoid reinforcing the very systems that unevenly distribute life chances, security, and vulnerability. It would instead take account of the historical conditions that perpetuate queer and trans oppression today: histories of racialization and patriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, state violence, and global capitalism.

For this reason, I want to end by pointing to the work of scholars and public intellectuals, activists and organizers who have and continue to fight against the rising global inequalities, dispossession, and precarity that goes by the name neoliberalism. I mean the left, feminist, and queer of color critique that I have drawn on throughout this essay that seeks to expand our knowledge of class and race as they intersect with sexuality and gender. And I also mean the ongoing political work of organizations aligned with liberationist, anti-capitalist, and justice projects that challenge the impact of the histories detailed in this essay—organizations such as Queers for Economic Justice, The Audre Lorde Project, FIERCE!, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Streetwise and Safe, Black and Pink, INCITE!, Against Equality, Communities United Against Violence, The Disability Justice Collective, Southerners on New Ground, Sex Work Outreach Project, Affinity, Gender JUST!, Critical Resistance, Project NIA, the Transformative Justice Law Project, and alliance movements such as #BlackLivesMatter.

Queer resistance to neoliberal sexual politics has been spearheaded by those most affected by these transformations: those who live in the intersections of economic precarity, racialized surveillance, and gender and sexual respectability politics; those whose lives are not protected by dignified marriage, respectable consumer citizenship, or streets made safe for property and profit. It is our task as cultural analysts to learn from these thinkers and activists, to defamiliarize what we have come to take for granted, so that we might move forward the vital work of understanding, confronting, and dismantling neoliberal logics.



Figure 8.1 Black Lives Matter disrupts the September 26, 2015 North Carolina Pride to call for solidarity with queer and gender nonconforming people of color, action against police brutality, and a recognition of the historical centrality of queer and trans people of color to LGBTQ liberation struggle.

Courtesy of Zaina Alsous.

### Notes

- 1 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.
- 2 Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 39–40.
- 3 Tejaswini Ganti, "Neoliberalism," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2014): 94.
- 4 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 160–165.
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*Edited by Don Romesburg*

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2018  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017  
and by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN  
*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*  
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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Romesburg, Don, editor.  
Title: The Routledge history of queer America / edited by Don Romesburg.  
Description: New York, NY : Routledge, 2018. |  
Series: The Routledge histories | Includes bibliographical references and index. |  
Identifiers: LCCN 2017042154 (print) | LCCN 2017050744 (ebook) |  
ISBN 9781315747347 (hbk) | ISBN 9781138814592 (alk. paper)  
Subjects: LCSH: Gays—United States—History. | Sexual minorities—United States—History.  
Classification: LCC HQ76.3.U5 (ebook) | LCC HQ76.3.U5 R697 2018 (print) |  
DDC 306.76/60973—dc23  
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017042154>

ISBN: 978-1-138-81459-2 (hbk)  
ISBN: 978-1-315-74734-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo and Minion Pro  
by Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon, UK

**To David, Asha, and Shiloe,  
for making queer history with me every day.**